

A romantic couple embracing against a blue background. The man is on the left, wearing a dark suit and white shirt, leaning towards the woman on the right. The woman is wearing a black lace dress and has her head tilted back, looking upwards. The lighting is soft and focused on the couple.

I want to be her
Perfect Storybook

NEVERLAND

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LUCY DARLING

NEVERLAND

Easton

From the moment I met Melody, I knew we were meant to be together. She was everything I ever wanted. I couldn't get enough of her, and I certainly couldn't stay away. More than anything, I wanted to make her mine forever. But all that changed the day she disappeared without a trace, leaving me with a broken heart and burning need to find her.

Melody

For five years I've lived a false life, one forced upon me by my father's mistakes. In hiding, I can't be myself, can never reveal who I truly am, and I will never again have the love of the man who owns my heart. But maybe it's better this way. After all, how could he ever look at me the same after what my father did to his family? I know he'll never forgive me, never want me—and when he finds me and kidnaps me, I know it's only for revenge.

NEVERLAND

LUCY DARLING

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*“One friend in a storm is worth more than a thousand friends
in the sunshine.”*

– Matshona Dhliwayo.

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Forever My Valentine](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[CONNECT WITH ME!](#)

[Also by Lucy Darling](#)

MELODY

I'm never getting out of here. My eyes stay locked on my phone screen. There is a picture of Easton and me at prom together. One great thing about young love is Easton and I will have all of our firsts together.

He is older than me, but he isn't like the other boys in our fancy private prep school. Some might have thought him to be stuck-up with a side of aggression. But once I got to know Easton, I knew it was far from that. Easton knew what he wanted and would never settle for less. One of those things he wanted was me. He made that very clear from day one.

The minutes drag by at a snail's pace. A girl should never have to go to school on her birthday. Especially one I've been counting down the seconds to.

I bet Easton is already waiting for me out in the parking lot. God, I've missed him. I smile. That's all I've ever done from the moment he stole my heart and made me believe in life again. Believe in me. That I could lean on him, and he'd always be there even when my dreams and life felt scary.

Since Easton came into my life, so many more things seemed possible. Even during my darkest of times. I hate that we have to be away from each other.

That's the thing that sucks about going and falling in love with a senior your sophomore year of high school. I only got one year with Easton before he was off to college.

Thankfully, the university he chose was somewhat local. I questioned if he picked it because of me or because it was

what he wanted. It wasn't the traditional college his family went to. Their legacy dated back well before the Civil War.

Honestly, it didn't matter. Easton always did what he thought he needed to do. It was something I admired in him. I wasn't going to fight him on it even if it was selfish on my part.

He's never quick to back down to anything, so it wouldn't have mattered if I'd tried to get him to go somewhere else that might have been better suited for him. He said whatever major he took would lead him back to his family business.

The whole reason my family moved here was because my father was escaping memories of my mom. Her passing was hard on all of us.

Easton filled a hole in my heart. I clung to him, even if I did try to resist him at first. I was sure he had heartbreak written all over him. I've never been so wrong in my life. He was the opposite of what I thought. That man took his time luring me out of my grief, convincing me to be open to letting someone in.

Easton sucked me right into his world when most of the prep school wanted to reject me. I was the new girl. An outsider to all of them. It didn't matter to them how much money my father had. They were all rich. I learned when I lost my mom that money means nothing. In fact, it can cause more problems.

It doesn't buy time or things the things that are really important. I was happy when we moved. It was a chance to find new friends. The ones I thought were mine slipped through the cracks when I needed them the most. You really find out who stands with you when the darkness creeps in. Too bad I still had no idea how dark times could become.

Then after years of grief, a touch of lucky love hit me. One of the most popular boys in my new school wanted me. I wasn't the normal pretty girl that made the cheer team. I always kept to myself even before I came to Bradford Prep.

I got a lot of heat from fellow female classmates in school, but Easton at times had more pull than the freaking principal. His

word was law, and he decreed that no one was to mess with me.

He made that clear to everyone the day we met. That rule still stands, even though Easton no longer walks these halls. People may not outwardly say or do things to me, but many of the girls here give me the cold shoulder. I don't let it bother me. I'm here to get an education. High school is but a blip on the radar of life. That's what I keep telling myself. When you lose a parent, a lot can be put into perspective for you.

Now I'm counting down the days until my senior year is over. Everyone says I need to focus on school and my future, but Easton is my future. The rest is whatever happens around us.

It takes Easton almost two hours to come home, but he does it almost every weekend. All that effort just to come and see the girl that he hasn't so much as kissed.

I run my finger across my bottom lip. I'm hours away from Easton claiming me in every way. I both hated and loved how steadfast he could be in what he thinks is right and wrong. I mean, of course, it's frustrating because I want to be connected to him in that way, but I respect him for it as well.

I was barely sixteen when Easton Ledger came barreling into my life. I suppose you might say swinging into my life because that's what he was doing the first time I laid eyes on him as he knocked the hell out of Bobby Young, who had me pretty much cornered in the hallway. It was my first day at Bradford Prep. I was the new girl. But Fresh Bait was the nickname I'd heard some of the male students refer to me as.

I'd gone from fresh bait to untouchable in a matter of seconds. Too bad when Easton made it known I was off limits he applied that same rule to himself as well. The most Easton ever did was put his arms around me or hold my hand. I get a kiss on the top of my head more often than not. He stopped aiming for my cheek when I started turning my head to try and steal a kiss.

Before Easton, I was shy around boys. When my dad moved us across the country, I went from a private all-girls school to a private coed one. With all of Easton's non-touching, it made

me start to touch him more. Even tease and try to bait him. He pulled me out of my shell in more ways than one.

Well, that's what my plan was until two months ago when he groaned and begged me to stop. He sounded so pained in his plea that I gave him mercy. I don't know why I was torturing the both of us. When I teased and tried to lure him to do more, it only made my body ache too.

I should count myself lucky. I've seen some of the boys burn through girls in Bradford Prep. That was never something I had to deal with. Not even when I first got here. Easton didn't have a line of past girlfriends.

Some of the girls try to toss in my face that I have no idea what Easton is up to at college, but he has never given me a reason to doubt him. I shamelessly broke once and asked to use his phone, pretending mine was dead, and he handed it over without missing a beat. Not before telling me it's not safe for a girl to be running around with a dead cell phone. When I asked what the code was, he shook his head at me as though my question was ridiculous and said, "*Your birthday.*"

I have no clue if Easton knew what I was up to that day, but I handed his phone back quickly and never questioned him again. Easton is a good man. Sometimes I wonder if he might be too good to be true.

Other times, I wonder if he was the gift I was given after the heartache of losing my mom. I like to think it's the latter. That she somehow had a hand in placing Easton in my life.

The bell rings, finally breaking me from my thoughts. I'm up and out of my seat in no time, my bag already packed up. I ignore the rest of the world as I rush outside.

I burst through the doors and find Easton leaning up against his car. His eyes are down, looking at his phone. I don't know if he senses me, but within seconds, his gaze is directed at me. A smile pulls at his handsome face. I run to him, throwing myself at him. He catches me easily. The man is well above six feet tall, while I am barely over five feet.

“Happy birthday, Neverland,” he whispers against my lips before his mouth claims mine in a kiss I’ll never forget.

Finally. This is going to be the best birthday ever.

Sugary sweet. It's how I knew she would taste. Her soft lips part for me, allowing my tongue to slip in to meet hers. I groan. Years I've been waiting for this moment, and I knew it would be like this with her. I want the kiss to be gentle at first, but quickly, years of need come pushing forward. I grip her ass harder.

I don't want to hurt her, but it would be nice if my hold left a mark behind. I always have crazy fucked-up thoughts when it comes to her. It's why I held back. I feared that what might come out would be something she couldn't handle. She brought out a side of me I didn't know existed. I needed her to love me. I also had to build her trust.

I try to keep it in check, but my self-control has been dangling by a thin thread for a while now. I remind myself that while Melody might be eighteen now, I slid right over twenty-one a few weeks ago myself. She's still young and innocent, and I need to continue to take things slowly.

From the second I met Melody, I knew she was the one for me. My whole life fell into place. It's ironic because every aspect of my life had been planned for me. I'd followed what my family and tradition expected.

At times, I wondered if there might be something else out there that I was missing. That maybe I shouldn't just fall in line with what my parents wanted. Don't get me wrong; I love my parents and know they want the best for me.

Then she came along.

Melody was the one thing that felt right. The one thing that mattered to me. I'd follow in my father's footsteps as long as it meant I got to have her.

I didn't care what anyone else said. The second I spotted her in the hallway of Bradford Prep, I knew Melody would be my forever. She held a missing piece inside of me that I hadn't known wasn't there. Not only that, she glued all the others together. With her, it all clicked right into place.

My parents told me I'd go on to college. That I'd meet so many other people and see a whole new world. I did see another world. One that I didn't want without Melody.

My mom says I have a hero complex. She told me that to deter me from what she thought was me trying to save Melody. She assumed I felt bad for her because she was the new girl with a broken heart I wanted to fix. But my mom was wrong. I didn't want to repair Melody's heart; I wanted to own it. What's the point of a hero if he doesn't fill his role? There was only one girl I ever wanted to save. Not that I thought she needed me to.

Even with her broken wings, I knew with a little courage, she would fly all on her own again. I could only hope that my little bird would come back to me. I knew the second my eyes met Melody she had a soul deeper than all of us. We might all see her, but she saw everyone to the core. It had nothing to do with money. The person you were is what she cared about.

That's all she cared about. I wanted her. That scared the shit out of me because in that second, I knew I'd do terrible things to have her. Things her sweet soul would never accept.

There are so many people that think she held me back, but that couldn't be further from the truth. It was her that pushed me down the path my parents had always wanted. Before her, I began to question if I wanted to even fill my father's shoes.

Any rebellion that started to take hold, Melody shook away. She grounded me in a way that no one else ever could have. She wasn't the only one that was broken when we first met. So in a way, she was my hero, allowing me to become who I was meant to be.

My parents didn't see it that way because I didn't go to the college they wanted. The same one that generations of Ledgers had attended. I didn't want to leave her. That choice was all me. I stayed somewhat local while still working toward being a husband that could take care of her.

"Neverland," I whisper against her mouth. How many years have I dreamed of kissing her?

My mom told me to be careful from the moment I came home and told her about the girl I knew was my forever. I wasn't shy about letting anyone know Melody was mine. It wasn't up for discussion. I always did what my parents asked, but she is for me.

My parents were both hesitant about Melody. Her father had a bad reputation and shadows that followed him. I didn't care. Before Melody, my Neverland girl, I was unsettled. She gave me a purpose. I wanted to heal her broken heart. She was my Neverland. A place I didn't know was an option for me.

All my life, I played by the book with what society and my parents wanted, but with Melody it was different. I no longer felt as though I needed to please everyone, becoming filled with resentment. Her resilience in life showed me that none of those things mattered.

I resented the life that had been forced upon me. I felt like I had no other choice, but the truth was I had nothing I craved. She grounded me.

I don't care if other people think it is young, naïve love. Melody is full of dreams. If they're her dreams, that makes them mine too. And I plan on making every single one of them come true.

When I see the passion she has for something, it doesn't compare to anything I've experienced. Her heart goes into everything she does. She's unstoppable. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

I want to be her perfect storybook, the ones she doodles about in all her journals. She thinks they're her thoughts. Stories she crafts so easily in her mind. One day the world will hear them.

Her mind is sprinkled with magic that others can't see. Not even her. But I see it, I see her. Melody has a golden sweetness inside of her that one day the world will get to taste. All I can hope is to be on the sidelines cheering her on when they do. Knowing that she is still mine.

I'll follow in my family's footsteps. A path that's been set for me since I was born. I'll do it, knowing it will allow my Neverland girl to have dreams at her fingertips. I can't wait to see what she gives the world. All I care about is that my girl lies down in bed each night with me. I want to be her home.

"Easton." She beams at me, her legs wrapped around my waist. "I missed you." Melody kisses me again. I groan.

"Baby!" A few cat calls ring out in the parking lot.

"Sorry." She gives me a mischievous smile, and I know she's not at all. "What's the plan?"

"I have to take you home." I glare at the fuckers staring at us.

"What?!"

"I promised your dad I would. He wants to take you and your sister out to dinner. Then you're *all* mine."

"Fine." She relaxes in my arms but doesn't let go. When it comes to her father and sister, Melody can never tell them no.

Melody has taken a bit of a motherly role when it comes to her little sister. It shouldn't fall on her shoulders, but Melody can be as headstrong as I am. They also share a birthday, so I know they should have their moment together even if I don't want to let her go for it.

"Two hours. That's all I'm giving you up for."

"Promise?" She smiles against my mouth.

"Promise."

I should have never let her go. I wouldn't have. Not even for a second if I had known what was to come.

MELODY

Many years later

I stare at my little sister, not sure what to say. If Elsa wants to walk around half-naked, that's her choice, but we are supposed to be keeping a low profile. She is nowhere near low profile, but then again, she's not a little girl anymore. I'm sure no one would recognize her now. Over the past few years, she really has blossomed into a woman. Still, I've never seen her dress this way.

I miss her curly hair and wide-framed glasses. Elsa was always wicked smart. This wasn't what I saw coming from her, but as she and I both know, you never can predict the future, no matter how hard you try to lay a path toward what you want.

Elsa was barely thirteen before our lives were once again tossed on their heads. I suppose I should be happy that no one died this time, but I don't often feel that way. When I lost my mom, a part of my heart was taken. When I lost Easton, it was as if my whole future was ripped away from me in the blink of an eye. My mom was truly gone, but even though Easton was still out there, he was unreachable.

I'm not even sure who I am anymore. I've just been going through the motions for the last five years. Putting one foot in front of the other, knowing I needed to stay strong for Elsa.

Trust me, I understand through way too much therapy that some people believe a person should stand on their own, but I know in my soul Easton will always hold my heart. I can try to move on, but nothing will match him.

My own therapist has tried to tell me I've built him up in my mind to be greater than he was. But I know the truth. He was my happily ever after. Until my fairy tale was taken from me.

I hate that over the years, the people around me have made me question what Easton and I had together. At times, it makes me feel unfaithful to him. The reality is Easton will never see or hear of Melody Monroe again. I've been scrubbed clean as though I ceased to exist.

I've struggled with that every single day for the last five years. Sometimes so much so that I thought the guilt would consume me. Thinking of Easton and me never getting to say goodbye. I'm not even sure if he would've wanted to give me one. I could never face him or anyone else in that city again after what my father had done.

I think that's one of the hardest things for me to accept about all of this. Sure, the loss of him in my life is unbearable most days, but the idea of him hating me because of the things my father did is what really drives a stake into my heart.

Easton's parents already had opinions about me and my family. Don't get me wrong; they were never anything but kind to me. But I know they didn't approve of our relationship.

They thought I steered their son in a different direction than the path they'd laid in front of him his whole life. So I already had a mark against me in their book. My father's actions had just put the nail in the coffin. It only proved them to be right. That killed me a bit inside because Easton would always tell me I was the golden sparkle that made him care about anything at all.

"You don't like it?" My sister does a slow turn to show off her dress. I mean, it is very Vegas.

"You have a date?" If she does, I already don't care for this person she's trying to be different for. The woman in front of me isn't her. I bet it took her an hour to straighten out her natural curls. They aren't going to know the real Elsa.

Over the last year, she has really played into changing who she is. I could be wrong. She was only a young girl when we left our old life behind, but this isn't what I thought she'd become.

"You know you're beautiful. You always have been. But there is a difference in the types of beauty. I'm just not sure it's my sister that's really standing in front of me."

"Isn't that the point? The old us doesn't exist anymore."

I wish that was true. I can't leave behind my past, no matter how hard I try.

“Do you need a ride?” I offer, wanting to find out where she might be off to. For over a month, I’ve known she’s been up to something. Not that I haven’t been up to some things of my own.

“Nope, got me a Lyft.” Her phone dings at the same time she says it.

Elsa—*no, Alice*, I correct in my mind—is out the door before I can try to protest. I have to remind myself that she’s an adult and can make her own decisions. It’s hard when for so long, I’ve been like a mom to her. I want to protect her from the world. But I know that I have to let her figure things out on her own.

Five years and it’s still hard to get used to calling her Alice. It was a name she picked herself.

My little sister isn’t the only one that’s hiding something. I hate keeping secrets from her, but I didn’t want to say anything because I think I truly don’t believe what is happening to me. I had no idea how my little project would take off. I grab my phone to check to see if there are any new updates.

I didn’t have a clue when I randomly sent my book to a publisher that I would get a response. Heck, I’d sent it to a few, and all of them had responded. I was sure it would be lost in some black hole. I took my shot, the one Easton always wanted me to take. I lived up to that promise. Never in a million years would I have imagined the amount of interest my book would garner.

Writing started as a way for me to remember and heal after I lost my mom. It was equally painful and cathartic to write down my story each day. Some days it wasn’t easy to get the words on the page.

Sure, the happy times were easy to write, but the not-so-happy ones, not so much. But at least this way, I got to choose my own ending. To imagine what my happily-ever-after with Easton would’ve been if not for what happened all those years ago. No one could erase my words or take that away from me.

I created my own ending. It might not be real, but at night when I lie in bed, I dream of Neverland. Of the boy who told me that I had a gift I should share with the world. I pretend the happily ever after I imagined is real.

My phone dings, and I see a message from my agent.

Gina: NEW YORK TIMES!!!!

I stare at the words. Tears slip down my cheeks but for all the wrong reasons. I should be jumping up and down with excitement, but all I can think is that our story is done. I wrote it. What now?

Gina: They're already doing a second round of prints.

Me: Awesome.

I'm sure she's confused by my lackluster response. Melody Ledger a *New York Times* best-selling author with my first book, *Neverland*. It was easy to pick a pen name. Melody Ledger. A name I always dreamed I'd actually carry as my own one day.

It goes to show that dreams can come true, but they don't always come with a happily ever after.

“*Y*ou got a death wish?” Owen asks me. His wife pokes her head out from the front door. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

I have a lot of wishes, and to be honest, in my darkest of moments, that might have been one of them. If anyone could and would grant that wish, it would be Owen.

He has a dark past, but things in life will change a man when he falls in love. Hell, what I went through took me from a boy to a man in the blink of an eye.

“Your wife has been ignoring me.” Getting a hold of Maggie has been almost impossible.

The woman can be a ghost at times, but a person can only hide so much. Especially from a hacker. You can try and clean up behind yourself, but flicks of digital prints are left. I knew I’d have to come out here if I wanted a chance to speak to her. If I wanted to truly get her attention.

“You wanting to see my wife is not helping your case.” Owen hooks his fingers in the front loops of his jeans, trying to appear nonthreatening when we both know he’s anything but.

With a family like mine, you know a lot of things. With great wealth comes power. That power can get you a lot of things. Like how I know that once upon a time, Owen was a hired hand. One that somehow crossed paths with his wife, Maggie—or Magic, as she’s known on the Dark Web or whispered about in the government.

Magic is a good name for her. The things she can do often don't seem possible, but she does them. I dug into her as much as I could, having always known she would sometimes help the government with projects. What got my attention is when I heard she'd been one of two people that stopped an attack on a group trying to infiltrate WITSEC. That was exactly what I wanted to do.

Now, I've been playing a bit of cat and mouse with Magic. Not that she's aware of it. I know what draws her out. Anything new or developing in technology. So what did I do? I bought one of the biggest tech companies in the world. I also let her come and play her little games with some of my projects and even steal a handful of things. If I didn't have more pressing issues, I would offer to pay her a hefty sum to show me flaws in my own systems. Though it's not about money for Magic.

My eyes flick to the giant barn off to the side of the main house. They live out in the middle of nowhere. I wonder if some of the things she's stolen are in there. It doesn't matter. Maggie isn't interested in my tech developments to do harm; in fact, it's often the opposite. She wants to know how to stop other people from using it for those purposes. Also, some of it is sheer curiosity. She can't help herself. Once she gets fixated on something, she goes all in.

"You know damn well, Owen, I have no interest in your wife that way. In fact, I think if anyone could relate to what I'm doing here, it's you." Out of everyone, he should understand what I'm going through. He was a goner the moment he laid eyes on Maggie. The same way I was the first time I saw Melody all those years ago.

Maggie is a bit odd, to put it nicely. In order to grab her attention, you have to do something outrageous. Owen wanted her attention because he wanted her and nothing more. It had all worked out for him, and now they are living their happily ever after.

Maggie steps outside onto the deck. A small baby bump shows under her dress. A hint of longing hits me hard. I take a slow

breath to hide my emotions, but I doubt either of them miss it. They notice everything.

“It’s a hard ask.” Maggie finally speaks. “I looked into you and her. By all accounts, you should want revenge on her family. How do I know that’s not the case? That I wouldn’t be putting them in harm’s way by giving you their information?”

What Melody’s father did made him a very hated man. Especially to the men that he got tossed into prison for the same thing he had done himself. He got the luck of the draw to be the snitch.

A thing I know he did to protect his daughters. He’s still an asshole, but I understand his intent. The man has robbed my own family of millions. His whole house of cards of an investment company came crashing down. But none of that matters to me. It never did. I would give it all up willingly to spend the rest of my life with Melody, my Neverland girl.

“All I want is Melody.” It’s all I’ve ever wanted. “Dig into my dealings, and you’ll see that.” Everything I’ve done in the past five years has been to get me back to her. I have nothing to hide.

Owen’s face grows less hard in understanding.

“I make no promises, but give me a few days.” For the first time in years, a spark of hope hits me. If anyone can find someone inside witness protection, it’s Maggie. The system is a very tangled web, but it was designed to be that way.

“Thank you.” I turn to head back to my car. “Crypris is working on a new tracker.” Maggie’s eyebrows go all the way up. “No technology at the moment can detect it.”

“Hmm,” she grumbles.

I’m sure she’ll figure out a way to change that. Which is for the benefit of everyone, but it’s something I can give her in a small trade.

I stop right before I get into my car. “I love her more than anything. I don’t care about anything else. I’ll tell you every secret I know if you tell me where she is.” There is nothing I wouldn’t do or give up to get Melody back.

“Okay.” Maggie leans into her husband’s side. They both have an expression of understanding.

I don’t work for the government, because technically the government works with corporations. I know things I shouldn’t, but when you have to, you trade in secrets.

I’ve spent all these years learning and collecting those debts. When my Neverland disappeared, there was only one mission left in my mind.

To find her.

I won’t stop until I do.

Not until I once again find Neverland.

MELODY

The emotions I feel when I stare at my father over the breakfast table are not something I could ever explain. Not that it's actually breakfast time, not in this house. We all seem to rise around noon.

There is no chef making our breakfast, just us fighting over who is going to get the last of the Cocoa Puffs. I can tell my sister had a long night. I heard her come in late. I want to dig and ask her a million questions, but I don't. As much as it's killing me not to, I know she'll tell me when she's ready.

My father always looks so sad. It makes it hard to be mad at him. What he did was wrong, but I think he got swept up in a moment of weakness in his life. Our mom was his everything. Then she was gone. I can't help but feel for him, knowing how I felt when Easton was taken from me.

"How's it going at Barns?" I ask my dad to make light conversation. Barns isn't a real company per se, but we call it that. The FBI gives my father unnamed documents to shuffle through to find flaws. He might have been a con at one point, but he knows how to play both sides of the field now.

It was a job that could keep him hidden away while still putting his skills to work. He and my sister are incredible when it comes to numbers. I've always been more like my mom.

"Same." He shrugs, not wanting to talk about it. I think it brings him shame. I'm not mad about the life we live. Who gives a fuck about the million-dollar mansion and the fleet of

cars? None of it is worth the cost of people you love. My dad's actions made me lose Easton.

To him, it might've been a simple, silly, girlish crush. But Easton was the same to me as my mom had been to my dad. The love of my life. We lost Mom from tragedy, not from a decision someone made.

"How about you, Alice?" I use this moment to try to get a little info on where she was last night. I can't help myself. I try to use her new name as much as possible, even when at home. I don't want to slip up.

"My night was great." She beams, a glint in her eyes. I don't think it has to do with some random date. I know my sister.

I will keep my mouth shut for now. Dad doesn't need more shit piled on his plate even if he has some of it coming. Mom loved him so much. It's hard for me to accept how he messed up my path, but still I feel loyal enough to take care of him and my little sister.

She never asked that of me. But I know she never would even if she wanted to. The rest of breakfast is filled with the same small talk until my father leaves.

I barely make it to my bedroom and my sister is on me. "What's going on?" she pushes. My sister is never aggressive. I almost laugh out loud because usually I'm the one questioning her. Now that the shoe is on the other foot, I don't like it.

"What are you talking about?" I may be acting dumb, but I know exactly what she's referring to.

"I know what we get from the program and what Dad gets. But somehow our main car, this house, and every other bill I could find is paid."

"Since when do you go over our bills?" I push back.

"I love you, Mel, but you're not the numbers person of this family." She's not wrong.

"But I am the one that manages the money so things are paid," I point out. You don't need to be a rocket scientist for that.

“Why are you asking me about this?” It’s not as if our lights are off. The opposite actually.

“I went to try to help out and pay some of the bills.” In a flip, my heart starts to hammer. I’m so used to the worst. That’s what it always is.

“And where did *you* get this money to try and pay them?”

“I could ask you the same because I’ve seen things are paid months in advance.”

“I’m working.” I give her an easy answer. “What about you? Please tell me you’re not on Fans Only.” She snorts a laugh.

“It’s Only Fans,” she corrects me.

“Seriously?”

“That is a safe place for women to make money.” I take a deep breath. I one hundred percent agree with her but not when someone is trying to keep a low profile!

“I’m not on there, but if you’re not going to tell me what you’re up to, why should I tell you?” my sister counters. I can’t call her on it. She’s not wrong.

I hate this. For a moment after Mom died, we all clung together. Then we began to drift apart. Now neither of us wants to give up our secrets when really, we should be confiding in each other.

We’re at a crossroads, and I don’t know how to fix it. I can’t even manage to fix myself.

“Mel.” She grabs my hand. “You know better than to think you can fix everything. We just have to live.” How have the tables turned so quickly? “We don’t forget, but we do have to move on.” Now my little sister is giving me advice. Honestly, it makes me sad that she’s had to grow up so quickly.

I’ve always been so much like my mother. But when I see the sorrow in my father’s eyes from missing her, I wonder if I’m more like him than I know.

“I’m trying,” I lie, wanting her to not worry because the truth is I’ll never move on.

I've tried. Last night, I don't know what came over me. It might have been how well my books are selling, but I bought a random cell phone from a store and googled him. It was something I've never done before. I've always been too scared. Not wanting to possibly see him living a happy life with someone other than me.

I should have stuck with my instincts. How many times can a girl's heart break?

I suppose Easton was right. I'm his Neverland. As in *we'll never be*. He'll find a land of his own family's liking.

EASTON

I know what my assistant Tray is going to say before I answer his call, but still I take it. He might work for me, but he drives me insane. His only saving grace is he gets things done. I often wonder if I work for him.

“I knew this was a terrible idea!” he shouts through my Bluetooth. I only made it back to the city seconds ago by private plane. I’m still in the process of stepping off said plane. The country dust still coats my Bolvaint shoes. “I feel sorry for *any* Charlotte Williams that lives in the city. Hell in the world, for that matter!”

“How many are there?” I only googled the top three common female names and last names and separated each within the top five.

This was one of my desperate steps, having a fake article published about how I might be getting engaged to some woman I made up. Knowing that my Neverland girl has a feisty side to her, I thought it might provoke her to come out of hiding.

Evoking jealousy is never something I played with with Melody. I always wanted her to be sure of what we had. In fact, I was the jealous one. Tray might be right about this article being a stupid idea. I just know it would trigger me to come out if I heard such a thing about Melody. But what do I really have to lose by doing it?

“You know how many people called asking for a comment or information? The news that the infamous bachelor Easton

Ledger is not only dating but engaged. Everyone wants to know who the lucky girl is that got you.”

In the past five years, people seemed to forget I was with Melody. While we didn’t hide our relationship, we hadn’t been seen in public together often after I’d gone to college. We always spent time alone watching movies and being together when we got the chance back then, but she was still in fucking high school. In the past few years, people have become extremely interested in my romantic life. Only because they couldn’t find one.

“We both know I haven’t moved anywhere.” Tray knows a lot about my life. When I hired him, I had no idea how much I’d come to lean on him.

“That doesn’t stop them from calling me!”

“Tell them no comment.” I shrug.

“If she’s out there and sees this—”

“She’s out there—” I correct. I won’t believe anything else. Her father flipped on a handful of his trading partners to give up the Ponzi scheme they’d been running. He wasn’t the ringleader, but he had his hands in it. They got away with millions. Melody’s father turned on everyone and gave them all up to save his daughters.

Not in a way that they would go to jail, but they got whole new lives. In the flip of a switch, they disappeared. The only reason I can believe Melody might have gone along with it was because of my family.

Her father got millions from us in the end in different investments. She really thought the loss of the money and the things her father did would change things for me. What she didn’t realize was I’d never been more alive and loved someone so much in my life until her. There was nothing anyone could do to change that. My girl had no idea the things I’d do to keep her. The things I’ve done to work my way into the right places with my money and power to find her.

“Fuck,” I mumble when I see another call come in, this time from my mom. “I have to take this.” I know without a doubt

that she's calling because she's already seen the article. Or someone alerted her to it.

"Good luck with that." Tray chuckles, knowing it's my mom.

"What is this I'm reading?" my mom yells into the phone.
"Years! So many years!"

I'm taken back by her anger. "I thought you didn't think Melody was good for me." The line grows quiet for a long moment.

"Years." She whispers now. "Are you really moving on?" My mom sounds disappointed in me, which wasn't the reaction I was expecting. I thought she'd be overjoyed at the fake news.

"No. I made it up."

A small laugh comes from her. "All right then."

"All right then?" I repeat. My mom is still able to shock me.

"The devotion you've had for her is unlike anything I've ever seen, Easton. If Melody is the woman that will make you whole, I want that for you. I don't want you to settle or give up on that."

I'm sure at first my parents were relieved once they believed Melody was out of my life. They thought she'd changed me, pulling me off the path they wanted. That was until they saw the real effect she had on me. Any path anyone thought I was going to travel down disappeared. It was me with a chainsaw making a new one. It didn't matter if it existed, I was going to make it so.

I was going to bring it to life. I would destroy anything in my way to get where I needed to be. My parents should have known that. I'm a Ledger, after all. Our last name comes with power. Everyone started to realize how grounded she'd truly kept me.

"You didn't always feel that way," I remind her as I step out of the back of the SUV when my driver rolls to a stop in front of my building.

I walk past my doorman to go down and get a coffee. I couldn't sleep on the plane ride. All I could think about was

Maggie maybe coming through for me. An address. That's all I need. Just a small crumb to lead me in the right direction.

I'm like a starving animal. I had already been all those years ago. I'm not sure how I held myself together back then. I'm worried how I might be when I find her again. I'm not as soft and sweet as I once was. Then again, I was only that way with her. Could I bring that back to the surface? Five years is a long time to let that slip away.

"I know." My mother's tone turns soft. She only wants what's best for me. I know she never meant harm, but part of me feels some resentment toward both of my parents. If they had been more welcoming, Melody may never have run, knowing we'd stand behind her family. I would always stand behind her. "I just—" Whatever she says trails off in my mind. All my attention is locked on a book in a display case in the window of my normal coffee shop. The title is in a bold, bright gold script.

Neverland. I blink my eyes to make sure I'm not hallucinating. But when I open them again, the title is still the same.

"I have to go, Mom." I don't wait for a response before I end the call. I stare at the cover. The author's name is like a punch to my chest.

Melody Ledger.

No, it can't be her. Even though I have that thought, something deep within me tells me it is. I always knew she'd be an author one day. I said it to her every day when I read her journals and the stories in them. I walk into the bookstore and grab one of the books and open it to the first page. The dedication right there.

To all the lost girls. We may run from reality, but we're never forgotten. Neverland will always be home. We all should get our perfect storybook ending.

MELODY

“*T*here anything you want to tell me?” My sister drops a copy of my own book down next to me. I guess she figured out my secret before I could hers. I fight back the emotions that well up inside of me.

“Oh shit, don’t cry.” She starts to panic, not wanting to upset me. I’m sitting at my desk, and she drops sideways onto my lap, wrapping her arms around me. “I take it back. Cry. Please. Let it all out. You always make me do it.”

How did she even find this? Also, how the heck did she know it’s me? I had no clue it would break out in this way.

I take her advice and let it all out. My little sister that I’ve tried to be strong for holds me tightly as the tears that I’ve held back or hidden in the shower or closet flow freely.

“I love you,” she whispers into my ear. “You’re my person. I’m not shaming you, but we should be celebrating this.” I lift my head. She picks the book back up. I can see how proud she is of me just by the look in her eyes. It only makes me want to cry more.

“But it’s over. Easton always pushed for my dream, so I wrote our story. What it could have been but never will be.” My sister’s eyes fill with tears too.

“Now you don’t get to cry too.” I try to stop her tears.

“No, we’re sisters. We cry together.” I only cry harder at her words.

“He’s getting married or something. I was terrible and looked it up.” Elsa wipes the tears from my cheeks. It’s so hard to even wrap my mind around that. All of this is so bittersweet. One dream of mine finally coming true with the publishing of *Neverland*, and the other being crushed with the news of Easton’s engagement.

“Then he’s not the man in this story.” She picks up my book. “This man. The one you wrote about would look for his lost girl forever.”

“When did you grow up so much?” I brush away the rest of my tears.

“I think we’re different.” I’ve always known that. If not for everything that happened with our father, she would have been at some fancy Ivy League college doing something with math.

“You want Peter Pan.” She smirks. “I want Captain Hook.”

I snort a laugh. “You got this Hook in mind, because I’m a bit scared.”

“That’s the point.” She wiggles her brows.

“It doesn’t scare you? I mean not the real Hook or whatever. The bad boy. The heartbreaker?” She ponders my question for a moment.

“What makes you think I won’t break his heart right back?” Of course she has a badass response. She can be shy and quiet at times, but that doesn’t mean she isn’t plotting. If anything, it only makes her more mysterious.

“But then what?” I whisper. A million questions of my own are bouncing around in my head.

“I think with some, you have to show them what they’re missing without you.” Okay, that kind of makes sense. “With others”—she looks me dead in the eyes—“you need them to fight for you.”

A small smile pulls at my mouth thinking of the first time I met Easton and how he fought for me. He knocked a boy out to make sure everyone knew not to mess with me.

“Really, Mel.” My sister’s words interrupt my trip down memory lane “We both have lost a lot, but I never worried about who would stick with me. I was young. I knew you and Dad would be here. You were older, so it was different. A boy stole your heart, but you never think you’re good enough.” She picks up my book again. “You might not be all into numbers like Dad and I, but your mind is sprinkled with pixie dust, and I think Easton made you believe in yourself.”

I grab the book from her. “You read it.” It’s not a question. I know from the way she is speaking she did.

“I remember Easton. Not a ton, but I do recall how he looked at you. Called you his Neverland.” She taps the book, and I sit back down. No wonder she put it together that it’s my book. “The hero in this book would do anything for the heroine. It wouldn’t matter where she came from.”

“You might be right,” I agree. “But sometimes you have to let people go because you’ll only hold yourself and them back. I saw the engagement—”

“Let’s go bust that shit up!” My sister jumps up from my lap, making me smile. She’s always so quiet. We’re supposed to be in hiding. I think she forgets that at times. Vegas is her life now.

“I’m not going to ruin some woman’s wedding.” What if these two are really in love? I think I know love. The idea of being with someone that isn’t Easton makes my stomach turn. It must not be the same for him. If he is marrying some woman, he clearly has been with her.

More of the reality of that hits me. We’re older. Easton and I were young, neither of us having shared more than a kiss.

“He was yours first,” my sister counters in my defense.

“He was the only boy I ever kissed. It was on my birthday.” My sister’s face drops, knowing it was also the day our lives got flipped upside down again, and I never saw him after that. “It’s only ever been him.” I swipe at a tear on my cheek. “I thought it was special and sweet that he was waiting for me to turn eighteen. Now he’s all...” I can’t finish the sentence.

“You know what? Fuck him,” Elsa bursts out, getting mad for me.

“I tried.” I give a humorless laugh.

“And he wouldn’t give?” She cocks her head to the side, I’m sure surprised.

“Nope.” Boy did I try. It’s almost embarrassing how much I did.

“If there is one thing I’m good at, it’s math, and this math doesn’t add up.”

“Love isn’t math.” My sister doesn’t seem to believe that from her expression. Still everything she said has opened my mind a bit more. What if Easton isn’t the man I wrote about?

I find that so hard to believe, but in my life, nothing is ever as it seems.

“*W*hat do you have for me?” I ask Miranda the second I step into the conference room. Tray is being my shadow. I haven’t stopped since I got my hands on this book.

“I got what you asked for, but it’s really not worth the risk of loss or gain. Textbooks hold a huge margin in the publishing world, but there—”

“I’m not asking for financial advice on this, Miranda.” She looks a bit surprised by my remark. Then again, it’s her job to do risk assessment with my finances.

“Then what is it you want? I’m sure they’ll sell for the right price. The publishing house was intrigued when I asked for some information about purchasing the company. They handed over everything on your list.”

I didn’t want to outright ask certain things to the publishing company. The last thing I wanted to do at the moment was draw attention to my Melody. I wanted to know what contracts they held and what potential authors they had that would make a profit. That would make it seem as though I was weighing the potential growth of the company.

The reality is there is only one contract I want to see. This is the closest I’ve been to finding her in years. I’m trying to remain patient, but I’m holding on by a very thin thread. But I know I need to keep my cool or I could blow the best lead I’ve ever had.

“The contracts of the authors.”

“Which? I can do a date gathering to see—”

I cut Miranda off again, getting straight to the point. I might not have wanted to draw the attention of anyone at the publishing house of my true agenda, but Miranda is a vault. She’s been with my family for years.

“Melody Ledger is one of their authors. I specifically want to see *her* contract.”

“Ledger?” Her brows pull together, and I’m sure she’s trying to recall if there is a Melody somewhere in my family tree.

“Yes.” A fucking pen name. For now.

“All right.” She makes a few clicks on her keypad before she airdrops me a file. I waste no time in clicking it.

Melody’s beautiful signature is on the sheet, but the address is a PO Box. That doesn’t matter. There has to be a bank account where she’s receiving payments. That wouldn’t be connected to a PO Box. It would have her real information on it.

That will take me nothing to get. I don’t even have to tell Tray. I drop the document over to him, and without question he turns to go find the information. I can’t help but wonder how far she is from me.

“Is there something I need to know, Easton? Something that I might need to brace some of our holders for?” She places her hand flat on the table. Miranda wants to be ready for whatever might be coming her way.

“I’m not sure,” I say honestly. “The debts have been paid.” There is no real way to see how this might play out. Not until I get my hands on her. There’s no way of telling what people’s reactions will be. Melody is paying for sins that aren’t even hers.

Money can be returned, but time can’t. The men her father gave up had to pay with time. I’ll have to go about this carefully in order to keep her and her family safe.

“Oh.” She lets out a small gasp of understanding. A few things click into place for her. “I suppose it doesn’t matter.” Miranda knows what I’m after.

“It doesn’t,” I agree. There is nothing or no one that will ever stand in the way of me and my Neverland girl again.

“Well, you have me.” She shuts her laptop. “I’ll do and trade whatever needs to be done.”

“I know.” It’s why I trusted her with this. She and my mom are practically best friends. Miranda might as well have been an aunt to me growing up. All the dots have connected for her.

“I would say I hope you find what you’re looking for or I suppose *who* you’re looking for, but we both know you will. If you’re anything, Easton, it’s relentless.”

“I will find her,” I agree. There has never been another option.

Miranda exits the conference room, leaving me alone. I know I’m minutes away from finding out where Melody is, but then what? I’ve never let my mind get past this point. My one goal has been to locate her.

What if she doesn’t want me to find her? I clench my fists and try to take a deep breath. My anger has been an issue. Especially after the day Melody disappeared from my world. I’d lost my cool more than a few times, but I knew I had to get it together if I wanted to find her. I knew I had a choice to make. I could rage through life and die miserably, or I could fight to get her back.

I don’t know why, but that anger I thought I’d taught myself to control is rising to the surface again. Reality is setting in. This might not play out how I want when I thrust myself right back into her life. What if she’s married or has a family? The thought of that alone almost brings me to my knees.

What if her book was a goodbye, a way of moving on? What if someone else has touched her? I close my eyes, the rage wanting to let loose. The ‘what ifs’ of life can drive you to the edge.

I’ll take her.

The irrational thought pops into my mind. They took her from me. Why couldn’t I do the same? Who could really stop me? The idea is insane, but I find I don’t care.

“Sir.” Tray steps back into the room. “Vegas. I got an address and already told the pilot we’re headed his way.” I nod. “Are you okay?” I’m sure he’s surprised that I appear to have no reaction.

“No.”

“I thought this was the plan.” Tray’s expression turns to confusion, which is odd for him.

“I need to arrange for a few more things.” I have to be prepared. I hadn’t been before. It was too easy for Melody to slip through my fingers. It’s not a mistake I’ll ever make again.

“What kind of things?” Tray is ready to make a list for me.

“This might not go how I want, but one way or another, she’s going to be with me.”

Tray’s brows lift, but he nods. The man is so loyal that he would help me bury a body if I asked.

Maybe I’ve gone crazy. I honestly don’t care. They pushed me here, and now it’s my turn to take control.

My Neverland will always be my home, and that’s the only place I want to be.

MELODY

All morning I haven't felt right. I should be excited. My agent is in a war with my publishing house about the next few books, and I still owe them one. It's not due yet, but they are pushing me to get it in sooner because of how well the first one has done. They want to move up the preorder date.

I think I'm writing fan fiction of my own life. Even in this second book, it's still Easton and me. This time, we met by accident. I think he's my blind date. He quickly realizes and plays along to steal me away. That would be something Easton would do. Or something he would've done back when I knew him.

My heart grows heavy at the thought. I don't actually know what he would do now. The Easton I know was always mine. Now he's engaged. What did I expect? I should be happy for him.

He should get to move on. He already waited for me when I was in high school. I shouldn't expect him to wait again. If I'm being honest with myself, the reality is he could have already forgotten all about me.

I want him to be happy, but it's so damn hard. No matter how hard I try, I can't pull myself out of this rut. Change is coming. I know it. A shift. I wrote what I always wanted our story to be, and now I have to move on. He has.

"I'm going out," I tell my dad, poking my head into his office. "Do you need anything?" Maybe getting out of the house for a

while might help. God knows my sister is never home. She caught on to my secret, but she's holding tightly to her own.

"I'm good, sweetheart." I step into his office and give him a kiss on the cheek. There is always so much sadness in his eyes. I wasn't going to let resentment rip another person I loved from me.

As mad as I feel at times, I wish there was something I could do to make my dad whole again. But what do I know? I can't move past Easton. A boy I shared a kiss with. It was more than a kiss, but it can be a little easier to tell myself that it wasn't. How the heck do I expect my father to move on from the love of his life, my mother?

In a way, I can almost relate to my father. After he lost Mom, he went down a dark path. He thought if we couldn't have Mom, he would give us so much more. The best of everything. He took a risk and lost it all.

I have also taken a risk. It was stupid to name a book *Neverland* and have my author name be Melody Ledger. I didn't think anyone would notice but my sister did. Hopefully, because she was so close to me those pieces clicked together only for her.

"You sure? I can grab takeout or something," I offer.

"Still have leftover lasagna, and I actually just got a pile of spreadsheets sent to me to go over." I glance at his computer screen, not understanding anything on it.

"All right. I love you."

"Love you too," he says before I start to head out. I grab my bag with my laptop inside. It's so nice out I debate if I should walk the half mile to the coffee shop down the road instead of driving. Most days, the heat can kill you here, but there is a nice breeze, so I decide to walk.

"Lyla," Ethan calls when I step into the coffee shop. It's midafternoon. There are only a few people inside. "You want your normal?" he asks.

"Yes, please." It's still hard to get used to having a new name. I hate it. I have to make a conscious effort to answer people.

“You want a sweet today?” I peek over at the display of pastries. They all look yummy, but for some reason I don’t want one. My stomach is unsettled. It has been ever since I laid my eyes on that article about Easton’s engagement.

“No, just my normal coffee.” He scans my card.

“Anything new?” He scribbles on my cup before handing it off for someone to make. I know he’s asking about my sister. Pretty sure he has a crush on her. Not that she would ever notice.

“Nah, I’m going to hang here to get out of the house for a bit.”

Ethan nods. “How’s your sister? She hasn’t been around.”

“Tell me about it.” I let out a small laugh. I don’t miss the disappointment in his eyes, but I’m sure Ethan will be fine. I don’t think I’ve ever come in here and not seen a girl flirting with him.

My sister has no idea of the attention she draws. Even before she started getting all dolled up. Her aloofness to men’s attention only lured them in more.

“Lyla.” The girl who took my cup from Ethan calls my name, letting me know my drink is ready.

“Thanks,” I say before grabbing my coffee and finding a seat off to the side to be alone.

I pull my laptop out and try to work. It’s useless because my mind keeps drifting to thoughts of Easton. Usually, I allow my thoughts to go to him for inspiration while I’m writing but today it feels different. Knowing he’s someone else’s has shifted something. And no matter how much I try to push it to the back of my mind, the article is now burned into my memory.

My fingers tingle, wanting to google his name again and do a search into the girl he’s marrying.

In an instant, he’s there. Not on my computer screen but standing right in front of me.

“Get up.”

Those aren't the first words I thought I'd say when I found Melody again.

On the plane ride over here, I read over anything that Tray could pull up for me while thinking of what I'd say when I first laid eyes on her after all this time.

I told myself I'd be calm. That went straight out the window the moment I saw her talking to the fucker behind the counter. He'd made her smile and laugh.

I didn't get to hear the sound. I was still outside the coffee shop, but seeing it was enough. It pissed me the fuck off. I was out of the vehicle before I could try to reason with myself.

So much for staying calm and being smooth. I should have known it would be this way with her. That I wouldn't be able to control myself once I saw her. It was hard enough when I had her to not cross lines.

How is it possible that she's even more beautiful than she was before? Her cheeks are a bit fuller and her hair a touch longer. As pissed as I am, my cock is already hard. It's been that way off and on since I knew I'd really found her. For a moment in time, my dick didn't give a fuck about anything. At night or in the morning, I'd often do the same shit I did before Melody disappeared. I'd let all the fantasies I had of her play out in my head take hold as I brought myself to release.

I couldn't stop thinking about it when I tried to sleep. The mind and heart want what they want. There is no controlling that.

A lot of the times I'd wake up mid-dream fucking her, and there was no stopping it. I let myself finish my release.

"Easton." Those full lips that have lingered in all my dreams part in a perfect O. Her eyes dart all around the coffee shop.

"Eyes on me, Neverland." All of her attention jerks back to me. I reach over and close her laptop. "I said get up."

She sits up a bit straighter, a flash of annoyance on her face. I've always loved her backbone, but right now, I'm not having it. It takes everything inside of me not to snatch her out of her seat. I don't want to make a scene. I lean forward and make that clear to her.

She's so used to the soft version of me. The one who holds back. I held back for years when she was at my fingertips. Then she was yanked from me. Any control I ever had is hanging by a thread.

"We can make a scene or you can do as you're told." I reach down and pick up her laptop off the table. Her brows pull together in irritation. All it does is make my cock jerk in my pants. There's my girl.

She licks her lips but gets up, grabbing her bag and coffee. I put my hand on her back. She doesn't fight it as I lead her toward my SUV and open the door for her. She slips in without question. I go around and get in on the other side before the driver takes off.

The car falls silent. I want to grab her and pull her to me, but still an anger I can't explain simmers across my whole body. I need to get myself under control before I do something I can't take back.

Like rip her clothes off and take her right here. How many times did she try and get me to do that when she was still in high school? So fucking tempting but then I'd have to kill my driver for seeing her naked.

“You don’t understand,” she finally whispers, playing with the bottom of her shirt. Doing anything she can not to look at me. I can’t stop staring at her.

I don’t want her to feel ashamed, but my patience has all but run out. It’s hard enough to not grab her and smother her with my body, wanting her smell and taste on me. It’s been so long.

I’m still in somewhat of a state of shock that she’s finally sitting beside me. Don’t get me wrong, I always imagined this day would come, but that is vastly different from it actually happening. I try to calm myself, concentrating on each breath of air I can get into my lungs.

“You’re right, I don’t, but that doesn’t matter anymore.” Finally she flicks a glance toward me.

“You could be ruining everything right now. How did you find me?”

A humorless laugh leaves me. “You really thought I wouldn’t find you?” She glances out the window. I hate it. I want to see her face to read every expression she has. I thought not having her was hard, but having her at my fingertips is almost unbearable when I can’t touch her. The reminder of how it felt to have her look at me like I was the only thing that mattered in her world is not something I’ll ever be able to go without again.

“Where are we going?”

“Away.” Now, that gets her attention.

“What do you mean? I can’t just leave!”

“Your father and sister will be alerted. No one else. You won’t even be on the flight manifest.”

“Flight manifest!” she screams. Her reaction shouldn’t make my cock jerk once again, but it does. She can breathe and I’m turned on. Nothing has changed on that front. It’s always been that way for me when it comes to her.

I should have seen her next move coming, but I was too focused on her to anticipate it. Thankfully, my girl gets her

coffee iced because the contents of it fly through the air directly into my face, drenching me and my suit.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t find out?” She lets out the sexiest evil laugh which I didn’t know was a thing until it passed her lips. “Just like you thought you wouldn’t find me. You also thought I wouldn’t find out about *her*.” Her anger is tangible, but there’s also hurt laced in her words.

Fuck, I shouldn’t play into this. But damn, the fire I see in her reminds me of the love I knew we had. That we still have for each other. She just needs to be reminded. I want all of it. It might be selfish, but I want to bathe in it. Her love and jealousy for me. I’m greedy and starved for it. For her.

“You can fuck so far off.” She turns her beautiful face from me. I can’t have that. It’s been too long since I got to stare into it. I grab her chin and jerk her attention back to me, not giving a shit that I’m covered in her coffee. “What are you going to do, blow our cover?”

“Neverland.”

“Don’t call me that!” she screams in my face, showing me all the pain she’s been going through right along with me.

“What do you want?” I ask her. Her eyes lock dead with mine.

“I want you six feet under.” She bares her teeth at me.

Years of anger rise to the surface for her. At this moment she’s not realizing how much of herself she’s exposing to me. My girl knows on some level she can throw anything at me and I’ll take it from her. If she wants to rage, she can do it and I’ll take it all. Every single bit of it. I know I’m the only person she’s ever been able to let out her true feelings to. Each day when she went home, she put on a brave face. With me, there was no pretending.

Her behavior is so different from the girl I first met all those years ago. The one I had to lure out of her shell when we were in high school. Back then, she had just lost her mom and had so much weight resting on her shoulders. But I always saw fire and passion in her eyes.

It's not a surprise to me that she has become successful. Her drive was something I envied. The world was laid at my feet, and I didn't give a shit. In fact, I resented it ...until her. She gave me a purpose, and then they thought they could take her from me.

I fight a smirk. I can't help it. God, she's breathtaking in her passion.

"You're a fool if you think I'd ever be with you again," she spits out.

"Even after your father stole millions from my family?" I'm baiting her. I should have seen it coming, but damn I love that she can still shock me. She slaps me so hard my driver even starts to pull over.

"Keep driving," I order.

Melody swallows but doesn't respond to my question.

"But that means nothing to me. You stole something I couldn't get back. Money is nothing, but you're my everything."

"You can't do this to me," she whispers. The hitch in her voice almost breaks my resolve.

Almost.

"Neverland, I'll do whatever I want to *you*."

I won't rest until she's mine again. No matter what it takes.

MELODY

My breath hitches when my eyes meet his. For the first time in my life, I see something others whispered about. That Easton Ledger has a dark side. He was popular, sure, but not by choice.

He didn't have to work for it. Easton always had an air of confidence or maybe it's more an *I don't give a fuck* vibe. He never gave a shit what others thought of him when we were in school.

I ignored the things I heard about him because some of the girls spread some nasty rumors about me when I first got to Bradford Prep. They wanted him for themselves, but he never gave them the time of day. I think that's what made them the maddest.

I remember the first time I saw Easton. I was passing the library when I got a tour of the school. There had been a few girls trying to flirt with him and a couple others at his table. He ignored them at first before becoming visibly agitated and telling them to get lost. The annoyance was written all over his face.

The only other time I saw the dark side to Easton that was whispered about was the day he punched Bobby when he had me cornered in the hallway against my locker. Easton came out of nowhere. I guess some things don't change.

Because once again, Easton is in front of me, appearing out of thin air. I can't help but feel the same way I felt all those years ago. My heart pounds in my chest. So many emotions flow

through my body. I keep throwing them at him, but he bats them away. My iced coffee is still dripping from his suit. If I wasn't so mad, I'd laugh.

So many memories come flooding back to me. They're more vivid now with him sitting here. My heart aches for the life and time I lost. The memories are a stark reminder that he's not my Easton. I'm not sure who this man is. What if this was him all along and I never knew?

"Why are you here?" I try again to get some sort of explanation from him. To figure out exactly why he's chosen to come back into my life.

"I let you get away with a lot, Melody, but I'm not going to answer that question. It's insulting. You know why I'm here." I swallow, my body buzzing. I know why I want him to be here, but that's not reality. He no longer belongs to me. Our story doesn't have a happy ending.

"Easton, it's been five years," I remind him. I want to tell him I'm not his to take, but I can't bring myself to say it. Even if I did tell him I want him six feet under.

"Your point?" He pulls off his suit jacket to wipe off some of the coffee that I tossed on him.

"Easton." He closes his eyes as though he's savoring me saying his name.

"Say it again."

"Fuck you."

He smirks. "Please." Why does that one word hit me so hard?

"Easton."

He opens his eyes. "Neverland." Now I'm the one that closes my eyes to fight off the tears. I want to hang on to the anger. "Don't cry." He plucks me right out of my seat. Easton has always been big. In high school, he spent a lot of time in the gym, and that obviously carried over to college.

He once admitted to me that he would exhaust himself so that he could find sleep. It was a battle he had his whole life. But I wasn't so sure that was true. Anytime we cuddled and watched

a movie, he was out, his body wrapped around mine, holding me close. I can still remember his warm breath against my neck and how safe and protected he always made me feel. He was my peace back then, in a world that had so much loss and hurt for me.

I bury my face into his neck, wanting even for just a moment to have that feeling again. That's what I tell myself anyway. But deep down, I know the truth. I can't help but be drawn to him. I was never good at resisting him. It's the last thing I should be doing, but being this close to him has me losing my mind. His familiar warm smell fills my lungs, and I can't bring myself to fight him any longer. I cling to him, letting myself have this moment. I push everything else out. All the hurt, the sadness, and the lost time.

Easton's hands rub up and down my back. The familiarity takes me back to a time that seems so long ago. I still can't believe he's here. I never thought I'd see him again. To be honest, I never wanted to see him again because I couldn't bear the thought of him rejecting me because of what my father had done.

I don't know if I'm overcome with emotion, but when I lift my head I'm no longer in Easton's lap. I'm lying on a sofa. A low humming sound fills my ears. My eyes lock with Easton's, who is sitting across from me. He has no tables or laptop in front of him. He's only watching me. I can tell from the nice leather seat he's in that we're on an airplane. He's even got a new suit on. This one is not soaked with coffee.

"What's going on?" I ask, my mind and body feeling exhausted.

"I told you what was going to happen, Neverland," Easton states as though earlier we were both in agreement with whatever plan he'd thrown out. This is insane.

"You did not seriously put me on a plane. You can't just do whatever you want." I swear that small smirk forms on his face again, making me wish I had another coffee to dump on him. "Where are you taking me? I at least should be privy to that." I cross my arms over my chest.

Inside, there's a war waging between me being mad that he strong-armed me and me loving the fact that he wants me so much that he's willing to do whatever it takes to have me. Even if it means kinda kidnapping me in a sense.

"I did, and I will continue to do what it takes until you come to your senses." I scowl at him, but it only makes his smirk grow. I feel the plane touch down on the ground. "And to answer your other question, I'm taking you home. The place I've built and dreamed of living a life with you."

I've waited for this moment for a long time. To take her to our very own Neverland.

She tries hard to mask her reaction to my words, but I see it in her eyes. I don't care how many years it's been since I've seen her, I know my girl. She's curious. She wants to let those walls down so badly, but she doesn't trust me.

Not the way she used to, at least. My girl used to tell me everything and never doubted what I said. There were a few times early on she'd be wary, but whenever I felt that from her, I was quick to shut it down any way that I needed to. Now it's all gone. I earned it before; I can surely do it again.

I have to remind myself to be patient. It's hard when I've waited so long for her. When she gave me a taste of her being in my arms again. But I can take baby steps. At least that's what I told myself while I watched her sleep.

We'll see how long that lasts. She hasn't thrown anything at me since the car ride, so I'll take that as a move in the right direction.

"What are you talking about? Are you on drugs or something?" God I've missed that smart mouth of hers. Been missing out on all the things I was going to do with it before she was taken from me.

"Which part of what I said earlier didn't you catch?" I ask. I know I sound like an asshole. The anger inside of me still simmers. I never spoke to her this way before. Melody always got my softer side, but she's been gone so long that softness has vanished from inside me. Only she can bring it back.

I try to reach out to lead her off the plane, but she bats my hand away.

“We can sit here forever if you want or you can get off the plane and see what awaits you.”

I would pick her up and carry her to the waiting SUV, but I want her to come with me. I don't say another word, wanting her to make the choice to follow me. I make my way toward the open exit door.

“You're talking crazy. This whole thing is insane,” she mutters, but I can tell she's right behind me. I can't help but smile as I go down the stairs. “We don't even know each other. We're basically strangers.” Those words stop me in my tracks and cause me to turn to face her. She looks surprised as though she hadn't meant to say them out loud.

“You could never be a stranger to me.” Her face softens. “We may have gone down different paths in life due to circumstances we couldn't control, but I know you still have feelings for me, and I've never stopped loving you. You'll see.”

I reach out and open the door to the SUV, motioning for her to get in. I brace myself for the fight she's going to put up, but to my surprise, she simply gets in and scoots all the way across the seat to the window.

My fingers itch to reach out, grab her, and pull her to me, but I don't. Instead, I let the silence fill the space between us. She keeps her focus out the window, and I can't help but stare at her.

I know we are only a short distance from the main house now, and I don't want to miss her reaction when she first lays eyes on it. I've waited so long for this moment. To share in this dream she once had for us.

Little does she know that it's about to become reality. That I listened intently to all of her ideas all those years ago as though my next breath depended on it. And this place is only the start. I just had no idea that we would need this place so soon, and I'm damn glad I didn't wait to build it.

The moment the property comes into view, I see and hear her sharp inhale of breath. A feeling of satisfaction fills me at her reaction. But nothing could have prepared me for the look that is in her eyes when she turns to face me.

“How?” The one word slips past her lips, tears brimming in her eyes. She turns back to look out the window again. The car comes to a stop, and before I can answer her, she hops out. I follow closely behind, not wanting to miss a second of this. “This isn’t possible. I must be dreaming.”

I wrap my arms around her from behind, pulling her into me. There were many nights we’d lie under the stars and talk about life. About how it killed her father when he lost his wife. You never know how much time you have with people. Her father worked obsessively. He always felt he had to give them the best of everything.

All that work he put in to make money couldn’t buy back all the time he could have had with her mom. She made me promise that would never be us. That we could one day have a place that was only ours, and the rest of the world could fall away.

I suggested a small island. She laughed, thinking I’d lost my mind. You don’t just buy islands. But I did. My Neverland always loved to tell stories, so I asked her what that house would be like if she could have it her way. I took all of it in, storing every little detail.

The architect thought I’d lost it when I told him what I wanted. A Victorian style home with wraparound porches but modernly updated. Between him and one of the best designers in the world, we pulled it off.

“It doesn’t look like it belongs.” She smiles up at it, unmoving. It’s not a typical beach house, but there is nothing typical about Melody. Her imagination has always been a world of her own making. My dream was only to make it come true. To show her that I could make her vision a reality.

“Isn’t that part of the point? A slice of heaven that is of our own making?” I use the words she’s said to me before.

“Our very own Neverland.”

MELODY

A dream I've had for so long sits in front of me, but I know those never last. It's why it's called Neverland. You can never reach it. Once upon a time for a brief moment, I thought I could. But that's the whole point of a fairy tale. It's too good to be true. It's why we read the stories and soak them into our souls trying to get a taste of them.

Easton helped me heal from losing my mom. I didn't think I wanted to ever love another person. Why? It hurt too much. But he pulled me in, giving me things no one ever did.

Each day, I would have to go home and comfort everyone else, but it was only Easton who knew I needed comforting too. He gave me hope, and more than that, he made me believe in myself. Reminded me that everyone else's burdens weren't mine, and I should have a dream of my own.

Without him, I never would have written that first book and wouldn't be halfway through my next. I didn't think I had what it would take. Both of my parents were successful at one time. The fear of failing scared me even while I hated how much my family would work and focus on material things and not memories.

"Do you want to see the inside?" Easton's question pulls me back from being lost in my memories. I hadn't even realized that I had relaxed into him. His mouth is now only mere inches away from my ear. The closeness causes goosebumps to break out along my skin. I could get lost in this fantasy if I allowed myself to.

I both love and hate the fact that my body still reacts to him. But I can't deny what's still between us. Not that I'm going to act on any of it for obvious reasons. He has no idea how bittersweet this is going to be for me. I want nothing more than to see inside, but it could end me. I'm not sure which would be worse, not seeing it at all or getting a glimpse into a dream that is no longer in the cards for me.

"When have I ever led you astray?" Easton takes my hand, leading me to the house.

The sound of the ocean's waves are calming. I haven't seen the ocean in forever. It's been all sand and bright lights for the last five years, a world I knew I didn't belong in but that wasn't anything new; I never did fit in anywhere. Except with Easton. When it was the two of us, I could get lost in him.

I let my fingers slide along the rail of the porch. He pushes open the double doors into the breathtaking entryway with its gorgeous staircase. It doesn't go unnoticed by me that there is a picture of me and him from his senior prom.

"I can't do this." I try to pull back, but Easton is quicker than I am and pushes the door closed.

"Zero, go on lockdown." The sound of clicks echoes throughout the house at his command. I grab one of the handles to the front door, but it doesn't open. I even try to turn the lock on it. I'm not sure if it's for show or it's being held in place.

"Easton," I snap. "Are you seriously kidnapping me right now?"

"I thought we had cleared that up already." The passive expression on his face ignites me. I can't play these games. It's not only me I have to think about. It's never only me I get to think about.

That only fuels my anger more. The audacity of him to show me what could have been if life had worked out the way we planned. I don't even understand what he's doing. Is this his way of getting back at me for what my father did? That

thought doesn't sit well with me, but what other explanation do I have at this point?

I never knew Easton to be cruel, but maybe the rumors I heard when I was younger were true. You never mess with Easton Ledger. No one ever did, either. After the day he staked a claim to me, no one bothered me. Even after he graduated, people gave me a wide berth.

I didn't realize back then how powerful his family was. Those weren't things that interested me. That was one of my mistakes. When I found out all my father's wrongdoings, Easton's family was at the top of the list. You think the world is run by the government. That couldn't be further from the truth. Companies run the world. Everything is about greed.

"Ahh!" I scream, going for the giant framed picture of me and him on the wall.

I'm smiling at the camera while he is staring down at me. I grab and pull, but it doesn't budge. It's all fake. They want us to play the part of socialites. From one generation to the next. I hated every second of it.

"Everything is bolted down in case of a hurricane," Easton informs me. "Here." He hands me a beautiful vase sitting on a table in the entryway. My eyes catch a picture of my sister and I in a frame next to it. It cuts me open. How does he do that? I try to protect myself, but he keeps making me bleed love for him. "Go on," he encourages me.

I don't want to play into whatever this is, but still I do it, needing to release the building pressure inside of me before I explode. I raise it above my head and slam it down as hard as I can. Glass shatters all around us.

"You can't put that back together," I tell him. He can try all he wants, but his world would never accept me, and some might want to kill my father. My father hasn't always been the best, but I love him.

"You can put anything back together if you're patient." He bends down and picks up two pieces, sliding them together. "So it's cracked, but it's still together." He keeps going from

being an asshole to sweet. Two different sides to him I'm getting. One that he's hidden from me.

He cuts me open. He always has. I keep bleeding love for him. It never stops. Only he can heal it, or one day there will be nothing left inside me.

How is that fair? He always made me bare myself to him, but Easton has hidden a part of himself from me.

"I'm not sure we were ever really together." A flash of anger crosses his face. Yes, I can smack him, throw the coffee in his face, and get nothing. But my words get a reaction. "What if I already have someone?" I toss out there.

My ego is still pissed about the whole engagement thing. He still hasn't even addressed it. If he didn't find me, would he have brought her here? Given someone else my dreams? I push that thought to the back of my mind.

"You're on thin ice, Melody." I'm not used to him calling me by my real name, but I am enjoying seeing the anger in him. He keeps snapping back to calmness, and it's pissing me off. I want more of the raw Easton. The darkness. That ruthless side that runs through the veins of all the Ledger men.

"I'm not on anything," I hiss back at him. "Now open the damn door and let me the hell out of here."

"I warned you." Again his voice is so calm, but nothing else about him is.

"Warned me?" I laugh. When in life does anyone ever get a warning?

"You're mine, and I'll do with you as I want."

Those are the last words I remember him saying before the world went black on me. Now with him standing a few feet from me and no one else around, it really has a whole new meaning.

"And I'm not that boy anymore, Melody. I don't give a fuck about *any* lines you might have crossed with anyone else. The ones I wouldn't cross back then. All I care about is that in the

end, you're mine. My ego or pride will never stop me from having you."

There is no holding back my anger. Her saying that we might not have ever really been together is bullshit. There will always be an us. There is no one that knows me better than her.

She wants me pissed off, and she's figured out just how to do that. My Neverland is looking for a reason to push me away. Love scares her.

I knew that from the second I met her. I knew I had to lure her in to me. I never wanted her to see the dark parts of me that might send her running. But Melody wants you to show all of yourself to her.

It's her nature to take care of the people she loves. I didn't want that burden on her. It was hard enough to get her to open her heart to me. But the reality is Melody thrives on healing people. She wants to protect everyone around her. It's a part of who she is.

I wanted to protect her. That was part of my downfall. If I'd given her more, she might not have run. Or even be so reluctant to me now.

I step into her. She retreats back but only to cage herself against the wall, making it easier for me to take up all the space around her. I hear her swallow, likely debating whether she's gone too far. Maybe she has, since any sanity I had left is now gone. The rational part of me has been overtaken by the impatient part. I tried. I really did.

“Do you think I’ll let you leave here and go back to that life? Go on to marry someone else and have children that aren’t mine?” The words feel like acid on my tongue. The thought of her with anyone else is enough to bring me to my knees.

“We can’t have a life together. It’s not possible,” she whispers, sounding defeated for the first time since I got her back. “And I should let you go. It’s been long enough that I held on to a dream that can never be my reality.”

Should—but she can’t. We both know it.

“I won’t let any of them hurt you or your family.” Five men went to prison for what her father did. Two have died already, leaving three standing. I have my sources and keep a close eye on all of them.

What happened to those first two men isn’t something I’ll fret over. No one who is a threat to my Neverland will be allowed to live. I knew the first two wanted blood. They got it. I think it sent a very clear message to the other three. That is something to be handled if and when it’s needed.

That is the part of me she doesn’t know. The one that I didn’t even really understand until she was taken from me.

My sweet girl who can let herself fall into the fantasy, I will protect that. She’ll never see the darkness I have inside of me. What I’m capable of. The things I’ve done to find her. She’d think it was a nightmare.

“Easton.” She rests her hands on my chest. I want to rip my shirt off so I can feel them against my bare skin.

“I can’t let you go. I won’t.” She reaches up, her fingers running along my jaw.

“Are you different, or did I not know all of you?”

“Both,” I admit, not wanting to lie to her. “But you make me different too. When you’re near me.”

“You do the same to me.” She pulls me down, her lips almost touching mine, but I lean back to stop her.

“If you kiss me, I won’t be able to stop. I’ll take all of you.” She smirks up at me. I’m easily twice her size.

“Easton, you don’t scare me.”

“Remember you said that.” I tell her before my mouth is on hers. I should probably take it slowly, but it’s been too long since I’ve tasted her. My need for her gets the best of me. I devour her mouth, owning it with my own. But it’s not enough, I need more. I need everything. All of her.

I lift her into my arms, her legs wrapping around me instinctively. There’s no mistaking our attraction for one another. It’s always been this way between us. The only difference being that now I don’t have to hold back.

I can feel the heat of her arousal through her clothes as she rubs against my cock. Fuck she feels good. Reaching down, I grab ahold of her ass to steady her and control her movements. I slide her up and down my cock until we’re in a perfect rhythm.

I’m lost in her, the same way I’ve been since the moment I laid eyes on her all those years ago. Nothing has changed. Nothing will ever change between us. No matter how much she tries to deny it. The love we share will remedy whatever life throws at us.

My happiness is short-lived, though. She breaks the kiss, pushing away from me. I miss the contact immediately.

“We can’t. It’s not right.” I can see the pain in her expression.

It takes me a second to get my bearings and process what she’s saying. In the meantime, my hold on her has loosened, and she slides down my body to get to her feet. She’s fighting herself more than she is me.

“There will never be a time when we are together that is not right.” I try to control my anger, but I know she can hear it in my tone.

She takes a deep breath, as though she’s trying her best to keep herself together. That makes two of us. My patience is wearing extremely thin.

“Like I said, you don’t belong to me.”

Here we go again with this bullshit. I close my eyes for a minute to calm down, reminding myself that her line of thinking is my own damn fault.

“You’ll always belong to me and me to you, Neverland. Don’t ever for a second doubt that.”

MELODY

I ball my hands into fists at my side. This is all so much to take. Part of me wants to say fuck whoever this other woman is, that Easton was mine before he was anyone else's. I almost melted into a puddle when he said he didn't care who I might have been with.

The jealousy was all over his face, but he still wanted me. The details of how I'd lived my life while we were apart didn't matter to him. Not that there were any, but he didn't know that. His words proved there is nothing that could push him away.

"There wasn't anyone else," I admit, not wanting him for a second to believe that I could ever be with anyone besides him. He is the other half of my soul, the love of my life; there will never be another for me.

"It doesn't matter." He clips the words, but his jaw clenches at the thought alone.

"It matters to me." I glance around the beautiful home made of fairy tales. The shattered vase on the floor is the only thing that mars the perfection. "It's not a fairy tale anymore. My Easton..." I trail off. My throat tightens, trying to get the words out. Speaking them out loud makes them real.

"What? What would *your* Easton do?"

"He'd do anything," I snap.

"I would." A wicked expression crosses his handsome face. "Anything."

“Liar!” I lunge at him. Easton was the one person I knew I could trust. It’s insane that I left but still wanted his loyalty. I know that, but to admit anything else to myself would be a lie. He grabs me, pinning me to the wall. His hands wrap around my wrists, holding them above my head. “You think I’d let it go?”

“Never.” He answers for me as he leans in, running his nose up my throat. I try to raise my knee to get a hit in, but he’s quicker. He pushes his leg in between mine so that I can’t move. “Six feet under. That’s what you said.” I hate how pissed I am, but still my body hums with so much need. He lifts his head. “I love this side of you. You only trust to give it to me. You don’t hold back with me because you know I can take it. That it won’t push me away. You’re free with me.”

“Free.” I laugh. I can’t move.

“You’re right. I am a liar. A desperate man does desperate things. The article was fake. I hoped it would—”

“Provoke me,” I whisper. He really does know me. I close my eyes, trying to stop the tears. I probably should be mad, but how can I be?

“Don’t cry.” He kisses my cheeks. “I promise it will all be okay.”

“I’m scared.” Easton lets my wrists go to cup my cheeks with both hands. “I’ve been so lost.” Now that he’s found me, what if it happens again? How would I ever survive losing this man twice in one lifetime?

“I’ll always find you. It doesn’t matter what happens. Know I’ll always come for you.” He drops his forehead to mine. “But you’ve got to learn to trust me. To know that my heart will never belong to another but you.”

“I didn’t want to go.” The memories of that day are as fresh as if it were only yesterday.

“I know.” He presses his mouth gently against mine. “I know,” he says again. This time his kiss is firmer.

“I’m sorry,” I try to say between kisses.

“It’s not a fairy tale if we don’t have to overcome something.” He lifts me again. I wrap my legs around him. Easton carries me through the house.

“I can’t believe you’re here.” I run my fingers through his hair. “I’ve missed you so much, Easton.” He lays me down on a bed. “I love my family, but I’ve been so—”

“Lonely,” he fills in for me. I press my hand to the center of his chest.

“I thought heartache was an expression.” He puts his hand over mine. “With my mom I knew she was gone, but you were out there.”

“I’m here,” he tries to reassure me.

“I questioned myself so many times. It made me feel terrible.” I would never admit that to anyone but Easton.

“You did what you thought you needed to. I would never ask you to let Elsa go.” God, I love this man so much.

“You’re not asking that now?”

“Told you. I’ve got this.” I stare up into his eyes.

“Okay.” I let go. “I trust you.” Easton closes his eyes, savoring my words. I will never run from him again. He fought to find me. I’m his. “I got lost.”

“I was never far behind,” he says, opening his eyes.

“Make love to me.”

“Neverland, I’ll always make love to you even when I’m fucking you.”

“Easton.” I fight a smile, my face heating. It’s different hearing him speak dirty to me. Oh, I could see it in his eyes when we were young, but he always held back.

“So many dirty things I’ve dreamed of doing to you.” He nips my bottom lip. “Even when I shouldn’t have been.”

“Now it’s you that’s teasing.” I try to thrust my hips up to find friction, but he’s got me pinned to the bed beneath him.

“I’m not teasing. This first time might be quick.” It only turns me on more that he finds me so alluring and sexy that he doesn’t think he’ll last once he’s inside of me. That his needs are too much to control.

“This has not been quick.” I start pulling at his clothes. He does the same. I want to savor seeing every inch of him, but the wait has been years.

I swallow when Easton is completely naked. He’s always been a big guy. Now he’s even bigger. I’d never given much thought to the idea that he could be too big.

“With me?” Easton takes my mouth again, soothing any worry I might have.

“I’m with you.” He’d never hurt me.

“Say it again,” he demands.

“I’m with you, Easton. I’ll never let anything take you from me again,” I vow. This is my life, and I’m taking it back.

The taste and feel of her lips on mine is all-consuming. I could do only this for days. But I know that both of us need more.

I break the kiss but only to remove the rest of her clothes. I almost come at the sight of her completely bare in front of me. How many times have I dreamed of this moment? Of there being nothing between us? She truly is perfection.

I lean down to kiss her once again before trailing my lips down the column of her neck. The mix of sweetness and salt of her skin is addicting. The same way it's always been.

My mouth latches on to her neck, sucking and licking her, knowing that I'm leaving a mark on her. I can't help it. The need to mark her as mine in any way is too alluring to not do.

All this fucked-up bullshit of us thinking one of us would want another is finally behind us. When she admitted there had been no one, I knew at that moment she was waiting for me to find her. She might not have realized it, but it's the truth. My Neverland is too alluring for me to believe that others hadn't tried, but she knew one day I'd be back to claim what belonged to both of us.

I continue my path down her body, focusing on her breasts next. I take her nipple into my mouth, giving it the attention it deserves. Her body arches, trying to get closer. Her hand is now gripping my hair tightly, holding me to her. One day I'll make her come this way, but today is not that day. I need more

than that. I need all of her. To be inside of her. To feel our bodies as one. To make her mine in every way.

I release her breast from my mouth reluctantly. My cock is now dripping with my desire for her.

“Easton, I need—” The frustration in her voice causes me to smile against her skin.

“I know exactly what you need. But you’ll wait until I give it to you.”

I resume my journey, placing soft kisses down her torso. The scent of her arousal calls me home. My mouth waters to taste her there, to bury my face between her thighs and make her scream until her legs shake and she can’t take any more. When I reach her sex, I close my eyes, breathing her in before I take my first taste.

Her hips raise off the bed the moment my mouth latches on to her clit. She’s as desperate for me as I am for her. The need to be inside of her rides me hard, but I know she’s not ready for that yet.

I devour her, licking and sucking her until her body is writhing underneath me.

“Easton.” She moans my name as her first orgasm hits and she comes against my face. I drink down every last drop of her. I’ll never get enough of her taste.

“Fuck you’re beautiful,” I say, lifting my eyes to meet hers. The satisfied look on her face is enough to make me come.

I give her clit one last kiss, then give each of her creamy thighs a nibble before making my way back up her body. Another time, I’ll kiss every inch of her, but that will have to wait. My cock has other plans. He wants to be inside of her. To own her in every way.

I take a deep breath to calm myself, knowing she’s not ready for me yet. I’m not a small man, and she’ll need to be soft and ready to take me.

When I reach her mouth, I take it roughly, unable to control myself. My cock nestles in between her warm folds. The cum

that's leaking from it mixes with her arousal. I try to keep those thoughts at bay. My willpower is diminishing by the second. But I won't come until I'm deep inside her.

Slowly a rhythm forms between us, my cock sliding through her wetness, hitting her clit each time it does. Her little moans try to push me over the edge. And it's not long before she's falling over once again.

I break our kiss, wanting to see her come this time. Her eyes closed, she throws her head back as her body arches off the bed.

"Eyes on me, Neverland." She obeys my command, opening them and staring into mine as the orgasm courses through her body. I've never seen anything more beautiful in my life.

When she comes down from her high, her gaze immediately goes to my cock. She licks her lips, her hand reaching down between us to stroke me.

I stop her after only a few strokes, removing her hand from my cock. An adorable pout forms on her lips. If she only knew how close I am to losing control, she would understand.

"The first time I come will be inside you, Neverland." I bring her hand to my mouth to kiss.

"Then what are you waiting for?" There's my girl. I don't need to be told twice. All rational thought leaves my mind. Taking myself in hand, I guide my cock to her entrance, slowly pushing inside of her.

Fuck. It's the sweetest torture of my life. Her cunt squeezes the head of my cock so fucking tight that my vision blurs.

"More," she pleads.

"I'm trying not to hurt you. You need to adjust to me."

"I want more. Take back what they took from you." She bucks her hips, pushing me deeper inside of her. My resolve breaks at her words, and I give her exactly what we both need. I thrust all the way in, pausing for a moment until her body relaxes.

"You're mine, Neverland. No one will ever know you in this way but me." She wraps her arms around my neck, smiling up

at me. No pain shows in her eyes, but she's been through so much in her life.

"I love you." She lifts up, her mouth meeting mine before I can return the words, but I don't have to. She already knows I'm way past fucking love. I'm not sure what one could call what I feel for her.

I pull out and thrust back in. A small moan pours from her mouth into mine. Her hard nipples press into my chest.

"Legs around me," I order, picking up my pace, thrusting into her. Mel gives me what I want without question. I want to feel her whole body wrapped around mine. For her to feel the weight of me pressing down on her. There is nowhere for her to go.

"Easton." Her breath hitches, and I know she's close. I have no fucking clue how I've lasted this long, but I knew I wasn't going to come without her.

"You gonna come for me?" She moans a response. "If you do, I'm going with you."

"Yes." She tries to match my thrust, but she doesn't get her hips far off the bed before I'm pinning her back to it, making sure I'm grinding against her clit.

"You want that?"

"Yes!" she shouts, starting to come. Her pussy locks down around my cock. My balls draw up so tightly it's almost painful. I thrust fully inside of her, keeping myself there as I come. Her pussy flutters around my cock, milking my release deep inside her.

I warned her if she came, I would too.

Inside of her.

Melody might be saying she'll never leave again, but I'm going to lock her down tight to me in every way possible.

Even if I have to play dirty. My Neverland said she wanted to see all the parts of me. She's going to get what she asked for.

She always does.

MELODY

I'm surprised when I wake to not find Easton next to me in bed. The man has barely let me be an arm's length away from him in the past few days. At least I think it's been days. It's all kind of blurred together.

I got lost in him and paradise. I'm sure he has to get back to real life. We both have to. My sister and father are probably freaking out. I've been selfish not reaching out to them to let them know I'm okay.

I shake any guilt I might have over it away. Everyone should get to be selfish sometimes. This was my moment. I waited years for it. I'm sure they will both understand in the end. I just wish I knew how this was all going to work out.

Is Easton going to keep me tucked away on the island hidden away from the rest of the world? I'm sure I could get my dad to come, but my sister wouldn't. Would we have to have hidden trips to see each other? Would Easton have to leave for long periods and then come back? Will we never be able to have normal lives?

It doesn't matter. If I can only have Easton for small chunks of time, I'd take it. I would live here even if I only got a week with him every year. It would be bittersweet, but at least I would have some sweetness in my life again.

I know it will be hard. Even now I'm missing him. I grab my robe from the floor. Between it and a swimsuit, it's all I've been wearing for the most part. Easton has a closet filled with clothes for me already, but I haven't touched them.

The fridge and pantry are all stocked with my favorite foods. All the old bathroom soaps and lotions I used before were already here. I'm amazed at all the small details. That he even recalls them all and had them waiting here for me.

The man hadn't missed anything. When we did get out of bed or leave the beach, I really started to see all of what Easton had done with this place. The island is big. He mentioned that more homes could be built. It was obvious that he was making it clear to me that my sister and father are welcome here.

From what Easton had told me, his parents own an island across from this one but about twenty miles away. I'm going to be completely honest, the mention of his parents had made me a bit uneasy.

I'm still worried about seeing them, but Easton keeps telling me I have nothing to worry about. I believe him, but I can't help the shame and guilt that weighs on me even if it's not mine to bear. The doubt and anxiety keep trying to creep in that his parents won't accept me.

I head down the hallway toward Easton's office. I'm guessing that's where I'll find him. Hearing his voice, I can't help but smile. I start to push open the door but stop when I hear a female voice respond to him.

"Are you sure?" the woman asks. It takes me a moment to realize whose voice it is. Emily, Easton's mom.

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Fine," she huffs back, sounding irritated.

I swallow, not wanting to cause a problem with Easton and his parents. He told me everything was fine. I know he did things with my best interest in mind, but he's not going to keep things from me anymore. We're past that.

"Neverland, come in." Slowly, I push the door open. Of course he knew I was there. Easton always finds me.

"Is she there?" Emily asks.

"Yes," he says, motioning for me to come to him. I do. He grabs me before I make it to him, pulling me down into his

lap. His arms wrap around me in a firm hold.

“Good morning, Melody,” his mom says through the speaker with a welcoming tone.

“Morning.”

“It’s so good to hear your voice. I’ve been trying to talk my son into letting Alex and me come over, but he keeps telling me no.” I smile. I have to stop jumping to conclusions. I need to trust Easton when he tells me everything is going to be all right.

“I’m not ready to share yet.” Easton nuzzles my neck. I bite my lip to keep from making a sound.

“Fine.” She makes the same huff I’ve heard from her before. “When you’re ready, I want to welcome Melody back to the family. We’re overjoyed that Easton found you again. When I saw that engagement announcement, I wanted to murder him,” Emily says, shocking me. I thought she would be pushing him to move on and get serious with someone.

“Really?”

“Yes, really. I knew that finding you was the only way for him to be happy again.” I stare into Easton’s eyes.

“I feel the same. I was lost without him.”

“I know, honey. No more running?”

“No more running,” I promise.

“I wouldn’t let her. She couldn’t get off the island without my help.” Easton smugly announces.

“Seriously?” I smack Easton’s chest. Emily only laughs.

“I’ll leave you to it. I’m going to start getting things together. Love you both. Bye.” She ends the call before either of us can say anything.

“What things?”

“Probably wedding stuff.” Easton shrugs as though them talking about wedding plans is totally normal.

“Wedding?” I mean, of course I’d marry Easton, but I wasn’t sure we could.

“We can do it here on the island if you want. Something small.”

“Married.”

“Why are you surprised? What did you think was going to happen next?”

“Honestly, I wasn’t sure. I didn’t want to think that far ahead. I was just trying to enjoy our time together.”

“Well, our time together includes forever.” I swear this man is trying to melt my heart. I don’t even have words to answer him. All I can do is lean forward and kiss him.

“What about after? I know we’re forever, but you’ll have to go back at some point. My family...” I have so many unanswered questions. A sadness fills me, knowing I can’t have it all, but I know you never can. Life has never been that sweet. My first lesson in that had come early with the passing of my mother.

“I told you, I’ve worked it out.” His hand slips under the robe I have around me to cup my sex in a possessive hold.

“That, Easton. You hide things from me. Another part of you.”

“You don’t need to stay in hiding. I’ve handled it.”

“It?” I ask, not really understanding what he means.

“The money,” he says simply, but I can tell it’s more than that. I stare him down. “I’ve done some things to make sure no one will come after you. Made a few examples of certain individuals.” A darkness flashes in his eyes that I’ve only seen a few times. All of them when someone was doing something to me.

“Easton?”

“What your father did was against the law.” I shift my gaze away from him, shame filling me. Easton grabs my chin to pull my eyes back to him. “You’re not responsible to pay for the sins of your father. It might surprise you that I understand what he did.”

“What?” I gasp. That’s the last thing I thought Easton would say.

“The investments and financial dealings he made were to destroy two pharmaceutical companies and one insurance company. Which he did in the end.”

“My mom.” A lump forms in my throat. I thought my dad was insane more than once. Ranting that some pharmaceutical companies hid life-saving medicine because they made more money when people were sick. “Pharmaceutical and insurance companies rule the world.” I repeated the words my dad had said so many times.

“They don’t rule me.” Easton is cocky in his words. “Your father pulled the curtain back on a lot of things. He might have stolen money in the process, but it got a lot of us to take notice. Others obviously weren’t as happy.”

“I don’t know what to say.” I’m so stunned.

“You don’t have to say anything. I just want you to know that while I’ve harbored a lot of anger toward your father for taking part in you disappearing from my life, I understand what he did. I would have done far worse.”

My Easton is not only cocky but clearly dangerous, but it’s always simmered under the surface for him. I’ve felt it, but it melts away when I draw closer to him.

That should scare me. It doesn’t. I know without a doubt that Easton would follow me to the end of the world. I can’t help but love his possessiveness. And the fact that he’s never shied away from how he’s felt about me no matter what anyone thought. He didn’t care. I was his. That is all that mattered to him until something threatened that.

“Does that turn you on, Neverland?” His finger slides through the folds of my sex. “To know I’d do anything to have you. No matter the cost or the collateral damage. I’d watch the whole world burn to have you. Fuck, I’d even be the one to strike the match if it meant you’d be mine forever.”

“Easton,” I moan. My fingers grip his shirt.

“See, I need you. Who knows what I might do without you?” He gives me a playful smirk, trying to make light of everything. Always wanting me to be happy.

“You’re right. You can’t be trusted.” I turn to straddle him.

“I’m glad you’re starting to see that.” He slides a finger inside of me. “How are you still so fucking tight?”

He grinds his palm against my clit. I know it shouldn’t turn me on, but the thought of him doing whatever it took to make sure I was safe does that to me. This man gives me love unlike any other.

It might not fully heal the loss of my mom, but it does stitch together that hole in my heart. When I’m with Easton everything is better.

“You should do something about that.” I pull at his sweatpants, and his cock slips free. Easton rips the robe from my body before lifting me to lie across his desk. A few things tumble to the floor as he does it. “I was gonna ride you.” I fake a pout, stretching out across his desk so he can see every inch of me.

Easton opens a drawer. The next thing I know, he’s grabbing my hand to slip a beautiful ring onto my finger.

“Oh my God.” I lift my hand to see the ring. “This is not—”

“The Pink Star diamond? That it is.” This man is always leaving me speechless.

I remember reading about the ring and how much it went for at auction. I thought it was insane. The man who bought it only wanted it because of its rarity. It is one of the world’s treasures, and he was going to hide it away. It is magical. I told Easton when I read the article that it shouldn’t be locked away. Now it’s not. It’s free, like me.

“I need you. Seeing you in my ring and nothing else.” I gasp when he thrusts fully inside me. His hands grip my hips to keep a firm hold on me. I know he wants to let loose.

“I can handle you, Easton.” His fingers dig into my hips.

“Only you ever could.” He half growls as he starts to thrust fast and deep inside of me. I try to lift my hips to meet his

thrusts, but he keeps me pinned to his desk. “Touch your clit. Use your left hand.”

I slip it between my legs, doing as I’m told. My clit is already throbbing. My whole body is ready for release.

Easton is watching me play with myself as his cock slides in and out of me.

“Easton,” I moan. I want this to last, but it’s too intense.

“Come for me.” I’m already there.

I cry out his name. Easton thrusts a few more times before planting himself deep inside of me. His warm release explodes into me, and he falls down over me, his mouth taking mine.

“I love you.”

“I love you too,” I say right back.

“I’m going to murder whoever that is.” He stands, his cock still inside of me. That’s when I hear the ringing too. How long has it been going off? “It’s my security. Only they have that line.” He reluctantly pulls his cock from me.

I watch him tuck himself back into his sweatpants. The man is still fully dressed.

“Don’t move,” he orders when I sit up to find my robe. I roll my eyes at him but stay sitting up and don’t reach for the robe. Easton grabs the black phone from off the floor. “What?” He barks when he answers. Easton listens for a second before opening a drawer to pull out a small digital pad. He clicks away, making a tv screen drop down over the mantle of the fireplace, the screen coming to life.

“Elsa!” I jump up from the desk when my sister’s face is on the news.

“Her father?” Easton snags me around the waist, pulling me into his body. “Clean it up. This isn’t how I wanted to bring them back from hiding, but it’s done. Release my statements.”

It’s hard to listen to what Easton is saying and watch the news reports on the Monroe family being found. My mind is racing with a million thoughts of how this is going to play out.

“What’s happening?”

“Your father is already on a flight here. He’s safe. My men grabbed them when your sister got made.”

“Got made?”

“Elsa hasn’t been laying low. In fact, she has been making quite the name for herself.”

“Oh God. What has she been doing?” I ask, but Easton is already making another phone call. He hits the call to come over the speaker.

“You have her?”

“I do,” a deep voice responds. Relief fills me. One of Easton’s men must have found her.

“Hand her over, Knight.”

“Sorry, but this little ace is mine,” the man says before ending the call.

“That motherfucker.” He shakes his head but a smirk plays on his lips. She must not be in danger based on his reaction. “Easton. Where is my sister? Who was that?” I ask, not so convinced based on the man’s response before he hung up.

“You Monroe girls can really make men do crazy things.” What does that mean? “She’s safe. At least from the rest of the world. Knight has her, and I don’t think he’ll be letting her go.”

What has my sister gotten herself into? Better yet, who has gotten her?

EPILOGUE

Fuck me. Doesn't matter how many times I see my wife, a rush of calmness and awe always fills me. I don't know how I lived so long without her. I know I'll never do it again. I've never understood the darkness that lives inside of me. It has always been there. Melody can calm it, but she can also bring it quickly to the surface.

She always thinks that I found her. That I was the healing she needed, but she'll never understand how badly I needed her. My life before her was all about my family legacy and what was best for that, no matter the cost. She says I breathed life and love into her. But in reality, Melody was the one that did that for me. She keeps me grounded in every aspect of my life. She's shown me what life is truly about.

Watching our baby girl sleep on her chest is more than I could have ever dreamed of. When I think my Neverland can't possibly give me anything else in life, she proves me wrong. I could stare at them forever. Both of them fell asleep not long after we boarded our flight back to the island.

While I love the island, I knew I didn't want to be there when Melody went into labor. There are many things I can have on hand, but a team of the best doctors in the world wasn't something I could bring there. Okay, I could for the right price, but Neverland told me that was selfish. These doctors were needed by others too.

Plus, back in the city, her father and sister could be there for the birth. I was sure I could handle anything that life threw at

me, but seeing my wife in so much pain cut me deeper than I ever could've imagined. Thankfully, Elsa has a way of calming my wife. I'm not gonna lie, I was jealous of the bond they had at first, but I'd never say that out loud. All I want is for my wife to be happy. If it took her sister being there to help her push through labor, there was no way I would've ever stood in the way of that.

As I watched my wife hold her sister's hand and stare into her eyes, I knew at that moment I would never have only one child. I grew up alone. Seeing the bond between the two of them showed me I wanted that for our children. With everything Melody has been through, it was always her sister that kept her grounded.

Their bond is different than anything I have seen in my life. It reminds me of why my Neverland felt she had to leave to be with her sister. They have a different bond, one I know will carry over to any children we have along with Elsa.

Our baby girl rests over the already forming bump on Melody's stomach. We talked about spreading our kids out, but it was too hard for us to keep our hands off each other. The doctor told us it would be harder to get pregnant with Melody breastfeeding, but she'd been wrong.

Three months after she had our little Tinkerbell, as I call her, my wife is pregnant again. I can't take full blame. We'd gotten the all-clear six weeks after she gave birth, but I still worried it was too soon.

I didn't want to hurt her, and I knew once I got my hands on her again that all my lust and need for her would blur all rational thought. Whatever stronghold Melody held on me in high school had only grown more when the world dared to take her from me.

There is something about the Monroe women that pull you under. History can show you that time and again, even with Knight being the latest.

Elsa carried that torch, and I have a feeling my own baby girl will do the same. Which I could only ever hope for because I know I'd do anything for my Neverland.

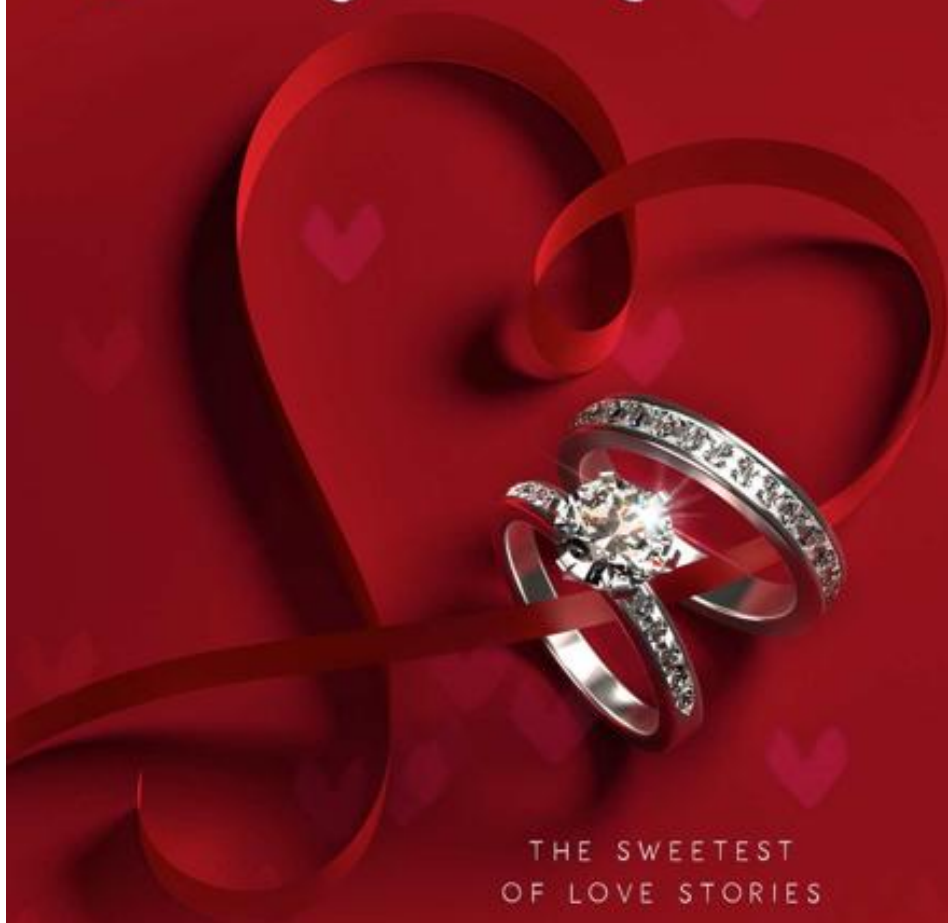


I hope you loved Melody and Easton's story. Stay tuned for Elsa and Knight's story coming later this year.

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Forever My
Valentine



THE SWEETEST
OF LOVE STORIES

LUCY DARLING

FOREVER MY VALENTINE

Petal

Even as a little girl, Petal Prescott knew Vaughn Valentinus was her forever despite the age gap between them. But fate had other plans. In the blink of an eye, she lost her family and her link with the boy she'd always loved. Now that she's older, she's hoping the man she's loved her entire life will see her than more than the broken little girl she once was.

Valen

I've only ever had one goal in life—to give Petal Prescott the life she deserves. But she hasn't made it easy, not when she thinks she's flawed. To me, she is and always will be perfection. But how can I make her see herself how I see her? Maybe there's only one way—by making her mine. The time has come, and now I'm going to stake my claim and show her just how perfect she truly is.

CHAPTER 1

PETAL

“Who let you get that dress?” I spin around to see Vaughn. Or as I call him Valen. I think I’m the only one that would dare call him a nickname. The loneliness and sadness that had settled in evaporates. How can I be at a party with over fifty people and feel alone? I’ll never understand, but it’s always that way when I’m back here. A house that has never been my home.

“I didn’t think you were coming.” I rush over toward him.

He’s in a tux but the bow tie is undone—or maybe he never tied it to begin with. To be honest, it only adds to his appeal. I launch myself into his arms. I know he told me to stop doing that a few years ago, but I don’t care. Valen catches me, the same way he always does.

“I wasn’t going to.” He holds me for a long moment. His nose grazes my neck. I swear he breathes me in, or maybe it’s only me doing that to him. The smell of him is always comforting. It reminds me of home and so many other things from my childhood.

“I missed you.” That is the understatement of the year. I’ve more than missed him.

“I saw you a few days ago.” He had on Christmas. I always get to see Valen on the holidays. The only reason I come back for them is because I know he’ll be there. It’s the only time he comes over to my aunt and uncle’s place. He and his parents. They’ve made sure to remain in my life.

Valen's parents are closer to me than my own family. I never understood why I was left in the care of my father's brother. We weren't close to them. In fact, I can only remember seeing them a handful of times before that.

I could only guess it was because my Uncle Cooper had two kids of his own, and my parents thought it would be better for me to grow up around kids my own age. Still, I know David and Judith Valentinus aren't my blood, but they have been in my life more than anyone else. That meant Valen had been too. At first, he was like an older brother to me. That was until I grew up and started looking at him differently.

Our parents owned ValenScott Corp together. Both our fathers created the telecommunication services business decades ago. I suppose now I own it with the Valentinuses. Really it's Valen that does everything when it comes to ValenScott. He wasn't given much of a choice after the accident.

He had big shoes to fill after my parents died. His own parents barely made it out alive themselves. It took David three months to wake up from his coma. It had been a miracle that anyone survived that crash.

I bear my own scares from the night that changed all our lives. The only one untouched was Valen. He hadn't been with us. He'd still been making the trip back home from college to meet us all for an event hosted by our moms. He had come home most weekends back then. His college was only an hour away.

I don't remember any of it. One second I was in a vehicle, and the next Valen was standing over me, the sounds of beeping machines all around. Valen might have come out untouched physically, but he was thrust from being some college kid to full-on adulthood in the blink of an eye. It wasn't only us he had to think about. He was now the head of a company with over a hundred thousand employees.

I don't blame him for not wanting to be in this house. I don't care to be around my aunt and uncle either. My Uncle Cooper's resemblance to my dad can be hard to deal with. I

think if I loved my uncle, I might feel differently. He might resemble my dad, but he is nothing like him.

He and his wife are always comparing me to my cousin, Tia. She's a grade-A bitch but no one else sees that but me. She is very good at hiding it. Everyone thinks Tia is perfect. On the outside, she is. Her modeling career is proof enough of that. Too bad her inside doesn't match. She's rotten to the core.

"Yeah, but before that it had been forever."

"Thanksgiving," he reminds me.

"Whatever," I huff. He slowly puts me back on my feet, but I don't let him go. "Where have you been?" It's New Year's Eve. It's almost midnight. "Another party?" I bite the inside of my cheek. Why put on a tux to come to a New Year's Eve party right before the party is close to ending? Unless you'd been at another party before. The thought of him celebrating with someone else threatens to sour my mood.

"At home. I got caught up working."

"Are you lying to me?" I drop my head back to stare up at him.

"I was working."

"You're always working. You could have been spending your night with me." I rise to my tiptoes and kiss his cheek. "Will you kiss me?" I whisper next to his ear. I can't help but tempt him.

"Petal." He breathes my name.

"It's almost midnight." I lick my lips. His eyes drop to them. "I bought the dress for you," I admit. It's not something I'd normally wear. It's tight and shiny. It draws more attention than I care for unless it draws his. My shoulders are bare, the faded lines of some of my scars from the accident showing. "You told me to stop hiding." Normally I made sure to cover them up.

Valen closes his eyes. I'm never sure where he and I stand. "We shouldn't," he finally says, opening his eyes. I can see the conflict in them. People start to count down.

“Are you really going to make a girl beg for her first kiss?” I tease. People are still counting down.

“No.” He kisses me before they reach one. His mouth presses hard against mine. I melt into him. Valen’s tongue slides across the seam of my lips. I part them for him, and he deepens the kiss. I moan into his mouth.

Valen’s arm wraps around me and pulls me close. My heart is beating so quickly that it feels as though it’s going to come out of my chest. The hard outline of his cock pressing against my stomach only makes it worse.

“More,” he groans, his mouth leaving mine to travel down my neck. My eyes flutter open to only find darkness. I don’t remember moving, but Valen must have led us into another room. “I’m going to need to taste way more.”

It’s not a question. Not that he needs to ask. I’m Valen’s. I’ve always thought of myself as his. I never listen to other things I hear about him from people. Gossip in these circles can be terrible, so I do my best to stay away from it. Being away at a boarding school can help with that to a degree. I choose to believe Valen sees himself as mine as well.

“Valen.” I gasp when I feel him drop down in front of me. My back hits a wall as he pins me to it.

“So damn soft.” His fingers glided up my legs, pushing up my dress.

“Oh God,” I moan when he pulls my panties to the side, his warm breath teasing my clit. Damn, I wish the lights were on. I want to see him so badly.

“You’re turned on. I can smell you.”

“You do this to me. I always get this way when I see you.” He lets out another groan before burying his face between my thighs, pulling one of my legs up onto his shoulder. I brace my hand on his other, needing to cling to something as his mouth devours me. “Valen,” I moan.

I can’t believe he’s doing this. How long have I wanted this? Dreamed of it even. Valen is finally acting on our unspoken feelings for one another.

A groan rumbles from him when he pushes a finger inside of me. His tongue first circles my clit before latching on to it. It's shameful, but that's all it takes to push me over the edge. I cry out his name as the orgasm rushes through my body. The pleasure is beyond anything I ever could've imagined. I should have known it would be this way with him.

"Pet." Valen slowly lowers me until my one foot is back on the ground before he rises to his feet. His mouth meets mine in another kiss, giving me a taste of my lingering orgasm on his lips. I want to give him the same pleasure he gave me. When I reach down to touch his cock, I gasp, not realizing he already has it out.

Valen presses it against my clit. A grunt leaves him as he strokes himself a few times against my slick folds before groaning my name, his warm release hitting my clit. He doesn't stop there, though; he continues to rub the head of his cock up and down it, sending me into another orgasm.

I let out a gasp when the head of his cock sinks into me. He jerks, and I feel him come more inside of me.

"Fuck," he mutters, his cock slipping from me before he pulls my panties back into place, both of our releases soaking them. The cotton material makes them stick to my sex. "We shouldn't have done that."

"Don't say that." His words immediately bring me back down to reality.

"Petal, you're in high school." My eyes have adjusted somewhat to the darkness, but it's hard to make out more than the outline of his face. Not that I need to. I know what expression he has on it. I've memorized every detail of him.

"I'm eighteen," I point out.

"High school," he grits out.

Valen pulls my dress down and back into place. The sound of his zipper is loud in the room even with the party in full swing feet away. His phone starts to vibrate. Valen pulls it out, glancing at the screen.

"They're looking for us."

“Who?”

“My parents. You go out first. I’ll follow behind in a few minutes.”

“No, you go first. I need a second.” He takes an audible breath.

“Fine.” He brushes his mouth against mine in a feather-like kiss. I go to grab him and pull him back, but he’s gone before I ever get the chance.

I stand there for a few minutes trying to collect myself. My heart is still racing. I might have orgasmed twice, but still my body wants more of him. When it comes to Valen, I never get enough. He’s been so distant since I requested to be sent to boarding school.

I might be under my uncle’s care, but there are a few things I got to choose, and boarding school was one. I hated being in this house. The reminder of why hits me the second I step back into the party to see Valen standing with his parents and my aunt and uncle. Of course my cousin Tia is there fawning all over Valen. The same way she always does.

I hate it. I hate *her*.

She is only a few years younger than Valen. They went to the same university together. More than once she’s talked about how the two of them have hung out. It drove me insane. I know she tells me on purpose, and that’s what really gets to me. It’s part of the reason I chose to leave here. If I wasn’t here, there would be no reason for Valen and his parents to visit. They are my family, and I’ll do whatever I have to in order to keep it that way.

Tia notices me first and smirks, placing her hand on Valen’s arm. I have the urge to go over there and rip it away, but I control myself. I watch as Valen glances down at her. There isn’t one flaw to Tia’s perfect skin. Not wanting to watch the show Tia is going to put on, I turn and leave, going back up to my bedroom.

I remind myself that freedom is closer than it ever has been.

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